

Iori Miyazawa

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OTHERSIDE PICNIC

Accomplices No More



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There are terrible things which, in the simplest of ways, with only a glance, are sufficient to instantly inspire fear. In the middle of the night, when there is no one else around and all is silent under the heavens, an encounter with an unidentified woman on the road is one of these things.

—Kyouka Izumi, *The Black Wall*

File 24: Mujina Attacks

1

"I love you, Sorawo," said Toriko.

"...I know," I had to reply.

She'd told me that several times now. Toriko loved me.

She stared at me and spoke again. "Well... How about you?"

I hadn't been asked that question before.

I couldn't answer it.

I'd feared being asked it for all this time. I had to have known it was coming eventually, but now that it had, I realized I wasn't emotionally prepared for this at all.

"How do you feel about me, Sorawo?" Toriko repeated the question, cornering me further.

At the same time, I was indignant.

What's she got to ask such a boring question for?

Boring, trite, unoriginal, stupid...

I hadn't wanted to hear those words from Toriko Nishina's lips, but I couldn't find even a single answer to her tedious question.

"Come on, tell me." Despite my silence, Toriko didn't get angry or impatient. "Tell me. How do you feel about me?"

Gulping, I tried to formulate a response.

"I..."

2

June 6th. Toriko's birthday.

I'd already heard from her that she wanted to spend the day relaxing together, which left me worrying over what exactly that entailed. Basically, she wasn't looking for the usual sort of birthday celebration, where we might barge into Kozakura's place like usual, or call up Akari and Natsumi to go have fun.

What was the best thing to do? I was already indifferent enough about my own birthday, so there was no way I was going to know what to do for someone else's.

I remember being invited to a friend's birthday party once back in elementary school. We had cake at their house, and a chicken dinner too. It was fun, sort of, but that kind of thing obviously wasn't going to cut it anymore now that we were adults. Even I knew that much.

Well, what do I do, then?

I wasn't getting any ideas. A lack of knowledge led to a lack of creativity.

Maybe I should just imitate her? I thought. Do exactly what Toriko did on May 14th, the anniversary of the day we first met.

Which means...make reservations for dinner at a hotel. And be smooth enough to book a room for us too...?

I couldn't do that. No way. Not a chance.

I couldn't possibly do it. Dinner? Sure. But booking a room? Making the reservation myself? There was only one way she was going to interpret that.

I was drunk that day, and wanted to collapse in bed as soon as possible, so all I thought at the time was how considerate Toriko was. But looking back at it with a clear head, it was impossible not to see what had been going on there. That day, Toriko was hoping that, if things went well, we might...

The thought of it made my head get all itchy. I wasn't feeling embarrassed, or shy, just awkward.

Well, duh. Toriko loves me. She already said as much.

If I hadn't ruined the moment by talking about Satsuki Uruma, would we have done what Toriko was planning to do? And if we did, how would I have reacted?

I couldn't imagine it. Or maybe I didn't want to imagine it.

Ultimately, the day arrived without me being able to decide anything.

I lacked the guts to book dinner for us at a hotel, so instead I chose as nice a drinking establishment as I could: a Japanese-style tavern in Ikebukuro with private rooms that was reasonably priced, and had good reviews for both the alcohol and seafood.

And what do we do after? Hit up another place? Split up?

I had no idea. I questioned if I even needed to think so deeply about it. I might just be wrestling with myself, worrying without cause. I mean...when you get down to it, it was *just* a birthday.

Oh, hey! Since it's her birthday and all, I should get her a present too, shouldn't I? I almost forgot. She'll definitely be happier if I get her one.

...I think.

What's Toriko gotten me in the past...?

After thinking that far, I clutched my head.

A pair of knives. With an original design branded into them. It wasn't for my birthday, though. But if I have to match that level of gift, then what can I even give her?!?!?! This is tough! Way too tough...!

I was getting desperate.

Enough of this! I can't figure out what I can't figure out!

I'm scared that if I just buy something at random I'll mess it up, so I'll

give her a frank apology, and ask what she really wants.

With that decided, I got out of the bed I had been lazing around in uselessly for the last three hours.

Time to get ready and go. I better not be late, at least...

“So, uh, yeah, sorry! I couldn’t figure out what to get you!”

Once we entered the tavern and were led to our private room, I bowed my head and apologized as soon as the staff left us alone.

“Oh, is that what it is? I was wondering what was up.”

“No, really, I’m sorry. I should’ve asked sooner, huh?” I was relieved to see Toriko was taking it rather lightly instead of getting all hurt. “What do you want? Let’s go shopping for it together.”

“Oh, sure.”

Toriko’s eyes pointed up and to the side, as if she were thinking. The indirect lighting of the private room shone softly on her golden locks and indigo irises. As always, she’d make a seriously pretty picture anywhere.

Her long-lashed eyes gazed at me, narrowing with almost a smile. “I’ll bet you actually forgot, didn’t you?”

“Did not.”

This time, she broke into a clear grin, and shook her head. “Jeez...”

“Wh-What?”

“I was just thinking, ‘Sorawo sure can’t tell a lie.’”

As I sat there, unable to refute her, the door to our room opened. Our first drinks, highballs for both of us, and a small appetizer consisting of whitebait and grated daikon that was included as part of the cover charge had arrived.

We ordered food, and then shared a toast.

“Happy birthday, Toriko.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ve gotta confess, I was totally at a loss for how we should celebrate, and the present totally slipped my mind.”

“Yeah, I figured that was it. Don’t sweat it. I’m glad you thought so hard about it.” Toriko looked all around the room. “Why’d you go for this place?”

“You said you wanted to spend some time relaxing alone together.”

“And that’s why you chose a tavern with private rooms?”

“Yeah...”

“Makes sense.” Toriko gave a satisfied nod. Today she was wearing a relaxed, sky-blue dress, not something showy like when we went for dinner at the hotel. She was probably matching the vibe of the tavern.

The food we ordered came, and from there things played out like any of our after-parties. I complained about the clearly excessive amount she'd ordered, and Toriko expressed confidence in my ability to scarf it all down. We got more drinks, trying out some unfamiliar Japanese sake. I perused the desserts, while also giving up and accepting I probably wouldn't have room left for them.

"I told you you ordered too much. I tell you *every* time," I complained as I dug the remaining meat out of a grilled yellowtail collar with my chopsticks. Toriko reached for my cheek with her right hand.

She liked rubbing and petting my cheeks, and touching my face, so this was no different from usual either. Or so I thought, until...

"Eek?!" I violently pulled back without meaning to.

Toriko's eyes widened with surprise. Her hand hung in the air over the table.

I probably should have been able to respond with something like a "Hey, what's that for, out of nowhere?" or a "Don't interrupt me when I'm eating" or something. But words failed me.

The feeling that welled up inside me then was so intense I didn't see it coming. My face couldn't tell a lie, so I must have been staring at Toriko with a shock I couldn't possibly mask.

The moment her hand touched my cheek, I had a flashback:

Of Satsuki Uruma's face as she tried to seduce me in the ruined building in Oomiya.

Of her hand which had reached out, lovingly, to touch me...

"Sorawo...?"

"S-Sorry." It had taken some force of will to even get that one word out.

The fact that I'd avoided Toriko's hand shocked me really badly.

"It's nothing, just...you surprised me a little," I said weakly. Even I didn't think she'd believe it one bit. How much must I have hurt Toriko? I hesitantly turned my eyes towards Toriko—her brow was furrowed as she looked back at me with concern.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Huh? Y... Yeah."

"Sorry. I surprised you, huh?"

"Oh, no, not really..." Toriko silently pulled her hand back. If my reaction had hurt her, she wasn't showing it. "Are you drunk? Should I get you some water?"

While I was failing to give a proper response, Toriko called one of the waitstaff over and asked for a glass of water for me. Things felt super awkward to me, but Toriko carried on as if it were no big deal.

Not knowing what I should do, I followed suit, and gradually recovered. By the time the bill came, I was back to my usual self

somehow.

On the outside, at least.

“Phew, I’m stuffed,” I said. “Couldn’t eat another bite.”

“You sure packed it away.”

“And whose fault is that? Every single time.”

“You always try so hard to eat it, so I can’t help myself.”

“There’s something questionable about that. Seriously.”

We had stopped after heading outside and were watching people walk around the bustling street. That was partially because we were too stuffed to feel up to walking right away, but mostly because we didn’t have anything else planned after this.

But we couldn’t just stand around forever. If we were going to go somewhere, we had to decide on a direction...

“Wh-What do you want to do after this?” I asked, still unable to find my resolve.

Toriko was silent for a while, then slowly opened her mouth.

“Thanks for today.”

“Huh?”

“For remembering my birthday and celebrating with me.”

“Well... I’m not going to forget it at this point.”

“Glad to hear it.” Toriko smiled and turned to face me. Then, speaking firmly, she said, “I love you, Sorawo.”

“...I know.”

“Well... How about you?” Toriko stared at me as she asked the question. “How do you feel about me, Sorawo?”

I’d always feared she’d ask me this straight-out. I gulped, trying to figure out how I should answer.

“I...”

What do I tell her? How do I answer? What’s the right thing to say here?

Words failed me.

Toriko was my greatest partner, the one I had spent all this time close to the brink of death with, and also my “accomplice” in exploring the Otherside, yet I had no words to answer her.

Toriko didn’t get angry or cry. In fact, she nodded, as if she’d foreseen this.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to respond right away.”

“...”

“I’ll give you a week. Think on it for a week, and then tell me your answer.”

“A week...”

“Yeah. We won’t meet until then. I won’t contact you either. So take your time and think.” Toriko turned and started to walk off.

“Today was fun. See you again, Sorawo. Goodbye—until next

week.”

3

The fact of the matter is, it wasn't uncommon at all for me to go a week without seeing Toriko.

Neither of us was the type to keep in constant contact, and at busy times, like when we had finals, we often wouldn't even send a simple “good morning” or “good night” message. Toriko sometimes went incommunicado when she was feeling down too.

But this was the first time that she'd explicitly said she wouldn't contact me.

A week... A week, huh?

She'd given me a time limit.

“Tell me your answer,” huh?

Thinking back, Toriko had been rather calm and quiet, considering we were celebrating her birthday. Had she been thinking about something from the beginning? Like, “today's the day. I'm gonna make her give a statement...”

I mean, she didn't say anything about the place I picked, and she kinda brushed off the lack of a present.

No, wait... Maybe she was pissed from the start? Because I'd so miserably failed to meet her expectations.

It hadn't *looked* that way, but it was possible. I couldn't tell what Toriko was thinking sometimes.

Actually, had I *ever* been able to tell what Toriko was thinking?

No, I have, I have. Of course I have. There's no way I understand her that poorly after all the time I've spent with her. Get it together.

As I was mulling over my thoughts, slurping up the noodles of my tempura soba in the cafeteria, someone suddenly called my name.

“Kamikoshi-san!”

I looked up to see Benimori-san standing there. She was a likable girl from the same seminar as me. There was a plate of curry on the tray she was holding.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Sure, I guess...” I replied cautiously.

What is it this time? Did they go off somewhere to do a test of courage again, get caught up in something weird, and now she wants my advice?

Benimori-san sat down across from me. “Sorry to bug you all of a sudden. You always head straight home, so it's rare to get a chance to talk to you like this.”

Whatever the main topic of this conversation was going to be, Benimori-san opened with something inoffensive. “This is pretty rare for you too,” I replied after a moment's pause.

“How so?”

“This might be the first time I’ve seen you alone, Benimori-san.”

Maybe the way I said it was funny, because she laughed and said, “Oh, what? Do you think I’m super popular or something, maybe?”

“Uh, well...”

When she put it into words like that, it felt awkward, as if she were exposing the shallowness of my understanding of other people. Fortunately, Benimori-san didn’t push any further on the matter.

“My presentation is up next, you know, and so I wanted to ask how much you prepared before doing yours, Kamikoshi-san.”

“Prepared? I didn’t really do anything special ahead of it... Just enough to cover what was on the handout I gave you.”

“But you had a pretty in-depth talk, right? Abekawa-sensei really got into it too.”

“Yeahhh. I wasn’t sure what to do either, so I just summarized the basic knowledge that people needed to have going into it. I think the question and answer period ended up being longer than the presentation itself.”

“Yeah, maybe it was, now that you mention it.”

“Other people’s were the same way too, so maybe you don’t really need to put a ton of effort into it? What was your topic again?”

“The fan communities of male idols...”

“Ohhh. Well, I suspect a lot of people really aren’t going to have a working knowledge of that, so maybe you should just do a summary of what things are like now?”

“Hey, that doesn’t feel so hard. You know how Abekawa-sensei can be kind of intimidating? I get all tense, thinking about presenting in front of him.”

“I get you.”

“But maybe what I actually need to do is slam on the brakes and not end up talking too much as a result. Once I start proselytizing the things I like, I lose all self-control. Though, I guess you’re the same way about ghost stories.”

“Because I go into it assuming people won’t get what I’m on about.”

“Aww, that’s such a shame. You’re fun to listen to, so I think there’s people who’d love to hear more from you.”

“Nah, I’m good, thanks... I mean, I’d rather that there weren’t too many other people getting into ghost stories.”

“Oh, yikes! That’s like the thing where some fans hate other girls stanming the same guys they do, only for ghost stories! I knew you were interesting, Kamikoshi-san.”

Was that a compliment? Maybe she was just teasing me.

“Anyway, I’m glad I asked. I was so worried about the

presentation, but you've taken a real load off my shoulders. Thanks."

"Oh, yeah? Glad to hear it."

I was on my guard, expecting her to ask my advice about something abnormal at any moment, but Benimori-san refused to cut to the chase. Had she really just come to chat? Was that even possible?

"You have something worrying you too, right? I'd be happy to hear you out."

"Huh?"

"Don't you? I mean, you were kinda slurping that soba with this pained look on your face."

It looked like it wasn't just Toriko I couldn't hide my inner thoughts from. It was everyone. I was getting sick of it.

I could've told her it was nothing, but... I reconsidered that before responding. This might be a rare opportunity to get an opinion from someone with no stake in the matter.

"Okay, there's something I kinda want to ask you..."

"Oh! Do tell! What is it?"

Although I was a bit intimidated by Benimori-san's excitement, I stopped talking and searched for the words to say what I wanted to say.

"Hrm... How should I put this...?"

I didn't have the general vocabulary to talk about my current worries. After struggling with it for a while in front of the stubbornly patient Benimori-san, this is what I managed to come out with:

"Wha... What do you think is the difference between a friend and a lover?"

I regretted the words as soon as they'd left my mouth.

Wh-What kind of stupid question is that...?

But Benimori-san's demeanor changed entirely. Her eyes were wide and sparkling. She was clearly elated.

"Kamikoshi-san...!"

"Y-Yes?"

"I'm thrilled."

"What?"

"I'd never have thought you'd talk to me about something like this. Oh, yikes! I think I'm going to tear up."

Why???

It wasn't just talk. Benimori-san's eyes were really moistening. Wiping them with a finger, she turned back to me with a serious face.

"It's a little noisy here. Why don't we take this somewhere else?"

"Huh? Uh, sure..."

"Come on, let's finish eating. Quickly now." Benimori-san urged me to hurry, then began gobbling her curry.

I took her up on her suggestion to relocate, and we ended up in a secluded corner of the university cafeteria. This was also where I'd "advised" Benimori-san during the incident with T-san the Templeborn, and where I'd talked to Akari before too. It was in the back, and we could talk without fear of people watching here, sure, but it felt like this place was sucking me in and that made me uncomfortable.

After ordering the cake set, like last time, Benimori-san leaned in. "Sooo... What are they like?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"This person who you can't decide if they're your friend or a lover."

I faltered in the face of a straight question that refused to beat around the bush. "What are they...like?" I echoed.

"Yeah."

Well, that's obvious. Toriko's...

I was about to say something, then came up short. Even though we'd been together for so long, and I felt like we were close, it was hard to explain her to other people.

Benimori-san was waiting. I managed to open my mouth somehow.

"They've got...a pretty face."

"Oh? I see, I see."

"We're nothing alike, but we get along."

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm."

"And, well... It seems like they love me."

"Hmm. I see. I see. I thiiiiink I get the picture?"

Benimori-san was getting more and more excited. Scary.

"I like it, I like it. You know, I always knew you must be popular, Kamikoshi-san."

"Huh?"

Benimori-san laughed at my dropped jaw. "I bet you don't realize it."

As if. What is she on about?

"Well, hear me out. First, even if we focus purely on your outward appearance, you're understated and indoorsy. You're also quiet, but seem reliable, so you'd be popular with otaku."

"Uh-huh..."

"If you worked part-time in a bookstore, an anime shop, a musical instruments store—anywhere that caters to that sort of indoorsy hobby—you're the type that'd attract a ton of regular customers. You'd better watch out."

"O-Oh, yeah...?" This was an opinion of me I'd never even considered before, so I just didn't know how to react to it.

“So, what’s the person like? Are they an otaku?”

“I don’t think they’re an otaku... I mean, they’re too outdoorsy for that.”

“Oh, I see! Hmm. Well, mountain climbing and camping can be otaku hobbies, though.”

I’m not sure that matters...

“You said it seems like they love you. What gave you that idea?”

“What? Well, uh, they told me straight-out.”

“You got confessed to?!”

“Uhh... Yeah.”

There was no denying it, but when she pointed it out it made me feel all itchy with embarrassment.

“You got confessed to by someone with a pretty face, who you also get along with, and yet...you can’t decide what to do.” Benimori-san nodded to herself as she spoke. “What’s got you worried? Do you think they’d cheat on you, or that they’re bad with money, or they’d shame you for your beliefs...?”

After saying all that, Benimori-san’s eyes went wide, as if she’d suddenly just remembered something.

“Wait, hold on... There was a period where you were wearing an eyepatch, was that because...?”

“No, no,” I shook my head with a strained smile.

First Akari thought T-san had punched me, and now Benimori-san’s misunderstanding it too. Toriko’d never do anything like that. Well, maybe she would, a little. But she’s not that kind of person.

Although, she has slapped me silly, and jabbed her finger into my eye...

You know... Looking back on it from an objective perspective, she sure is all kinds of messed up, huh?

Benimori-san peered at me with concern, seeing how I’d suddenly gotten lost in thought.

“Um, Kamikoshi-san, I’m sorry. Did I misunderstand things? Was this what you wanted advice about all along?”

“No! That’s not it. That’s *really* not it.”

“You’re sure? Can I go on assuming this is something it’s okay for me to get excited about, then?”

“I don’t know that it’s all that exciting, but sure.”

“Oh, thank goodness. You scared me there. But seriously, if something’s up, don’t bottle it up inside you. Talk to me about it, okay?”

“Yeah... Thanks.”

Benimori-san’s just plain nice...

Perhaps I was looking down on someone by thinking I understood them, yet again.

“Well, could you tell me what has you worried, then?” Benimori-san asked, the sparkle having returned to her eyes.

Though I was at a loss for words, I answered. “I feel like what my partner wants from me...and what I want from them are different.”

“Hmm, hmm. What is it you think they want from you?”

“To be their...lover?”

“And that’s not what you want.”

“I dunno...”

“You can’t love them romantically?”

“Hrm...” I thought about it for a while, but no answer was forthcoming. “I dunno.”

“That’s what you don’t know, huh?”

“Yeah...”

“Which would be why you asked about the difference between a friend and a lover.”

“Could be.”

“Why not think about it in terms of if you could have sex with them?”

“Urkh...!”

Of course it comes to that... Other university students are all so adult compared to me...

“Oh, did you two do it already?”

“N-No.”

“How far have you gone?”

“Urgh.”

“You haven’t done anything yet? I see.”

“W-We kissed, okay?”

For some reason, I contradicted her. Benimori-san smiled.

“Ohhh. Did you initiate?”

“No! ...They did.”

“And you didn’t like it?”

I hesitantly answered, “It’s not that I... *didn’t* like it.”

“Mm-hm. Could you imagine going to a love hotel with them?”

“We already did...”

“Huh?! You went!”

Realizing that I’d just provided information I totally didn’t need to, I started making an excuse.

“W-We went, but nothing happened.”

“Ohh, that pattern, huh?”

Benimori-san gave me a knowing look. Uh, what pattern?

“Your partner wasn’t disappointed, were they? No complaints?”

“They didn’t say anything... But I think they were disappointed...”

It was depressing thinking back to how sad I’d made Toriko. As I hung my head, staring down at the table, Benimori-san lost the ability

to hold back and murmured, “How can she be this darn cute...?”

“Huh...?”

I looked up to see Benimori-san covering her mouth. Her eyes were all dewy.



“You’re nothing like your usual self right now... It’s making my chest feel all tight... I want you to keep agonizing over love forever...”

“Benimori-san?”

“Sorry, it’s just... I just love this kind of stuff,” Benimori-san said, shaking her head as she came back to her senses. “What is it you’re looking for in your partner, Kamikoshi-san?”

“For my part...” I thought about it awhile until the answer came out haltingly. “I just want...us to be together. Like we have been all this time. Forever.”

“And don’t you think this person confessed their feelings to you because they want that too?”

“Well... I think they do.”

“Okay, it’s mutual, then.”

“You...think so?”

As I looked at her, mystified, Benimori-san asked, “Do you even want a lover to begin with, Kamikoshi-san?”

“I dunno... I never thought I did.”

“Do you have a sex drive?”

“Huh...?”

As I was acting weirded out by the rather forward question, Benimori-san chided me. “This is important.”

“...I dunno.”

I sure don’t know anything, huh?

I looked up at Benimori-san, thinking, *Sorry for making you take part in this frustrating conversation*, but she didn’t look irritated in the slightest. If anything, she was brimming with energy and I couldn’t, for the life of me, figure out why.

“There are people out there who actually *don’t* experience sexual desire, so if you’re one of them, it’d help you to be aware of that. You never look at this person’s little gestures, or parts of their body, and have a little rush of excitement?”

All the different Torikos I’d seen flashed through my mind.

“I-It’s not like...it’s never happened.”

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. I see how it is. Well, then maybe you’re just not at the stage where you’re thinking about romantic love yet.”

“So, you’re saying I’m still a kid?”

She sure worded that delicately, I thought with an unintentional smile.

Benimori-san shook her head. “You don’t need to think of it that way. Not everyone needs to become romantically active at the same pace.”

I didn’t expect that. Since she loved chatting about relationships this much, I expected her to look down on me more.

"I forget, Kamikoshi-san, have you taken any of Mitani-sensei's lectures?" she asked all of a sudden. Mitani-sensei was a young assistant professor in the social anthropology course I'd chosen.

"I took folklore studies last year."

"Then maybe you've already heard it. Something that professor said really stuck with me," Benimori-san said with a serious look on her face. "I forget what led to it, but here it is: 'Romance, love, and sex are actually all separate things, but our conflation of them leads to various troubles.' It surprised me to hear that. I'd never thought about them separately before. Because it never occurred to me to do so."

Even if I'd taken that same lecture, I didn't remember hearing that. It probably just went in one ear and out the other, of no interest to the old me.

"But if you're going to say that, then the same goes for marriage, cohabiting, and childbirth too, doesn't it? We all automatically assume they're connected, but the fact is there's a lot of things we've just convinced ourselves are that way. In many cases, it's convenient to assume they're all the same thing, but it made me think a lot of people suffer because they think they can't separate them. It was a real shock for me. I love talking about romance, and I've advised a lot of people about it, so it made me think back to reflect on whether maybe I was pushing any of those preconceptions on people."

"Uh-huh."

"So, Kamikoshi-san, if you don't know yet, then I don't think you need to force yourself to figure it out. There may not even *be* a difference between friends and lovers. Personally, I think you should start by thinking about what precisely you want things to be like between the two of you. What will you accept, and where will you draw lines? Then talk it over together."

I was surprised. I never expected to hear this from Benimori-san, who I'd had the impression was your stereotypical love-talk obsessed busybody.

I couldn't help but ask. "Are you like this when you talk to everyone about love, Benimori-san?"

"No," she easily rejected the idea. "I'm doing this because it's you, Kamikoshi-san."

"Huh? What's *that* mean?"

"There are some girls who get mad if I tell them that romance, love, and sex are different things. They tell me not to pick things apart, or that I'm making fun of them... I had one girl flip out and say, 'What, so you're telling me I'm just supposed to settle for being friends with benefits?!'"

"Ahh..."

"There are a lot of people who don't want to think hard about it,

who are just looking for the romance package deal. If it suits their partner, and their environment, then it's a valid form of happiness. It may sound like a nasty way of putting it, but I don't mean it in a bad way. I don't think it's *wrong* for them to feel that breaking apart the romance package and saying, 'I want this, but this part is wrong for me,' is too much effort. But you seem like you'd be good at handling that kind of headache, Kamikoshi-san."

"Y-You think?"

"If a bunch of stuff isn't making sense, then I think that's because the preexisting package deal you're being sold isn't working for you. So, how about you try forgetting the established framework, and considering the individual parts?"

"Makes sense..."

"Also, seriously, you don't need to worry that you're still a child or something just because you don't 'get' romance. Assuming that it's the natural way of things for friendship to progress to love, and love to marriage, well, it's, you know... Kinda like the progressive view of history."

That got a delayed laugh out of me. "You sure that's an accurate comparison?"

"Ah ha ha, I just pulled that out of nowhere. I'm pretty sure it's wrong."

In the progressive view of history, "primitive" cultures progress in stages to become "advanced" European cultures. It was something they'd drilled into us since first year as an example of the past mistakes of cultural anthropology. Benimori-san was riffing on that to make a joke.

"Well, the key thing is that you don't need to think about the popular view of how a romance should progress, Kamikoshi-san. It probably wouldn't suit you."

"You...might be right about that."

"Was I able to help a bit?"

"I dunno, but I do *feel* better. Thanks."

"No prob. Here's hoping your partner's the same type as you are. If they're someone who doesn't want to question the whole romance package deal, you may be in for some headaches."

She had a point there. If I had to put Toriko in one camp or another...she might side with the progressive historians on that whole package deal.

Seeing my expression cloud over again, Benimori-san went on. "You should try talking to more people about it. You're not used to getting advice about your relationships, are you, Kamikoshi-san?"

"Well, no, I'm not."

"Do you have friends you can go to?"

“Hrmm...”

Frankly, no one was coming to mind. As I was groaning, Benimori-san spoke. “Oh, I know! How about her? You know, the one who looks like a model! With the super pretty blonde hair. You two were walking around together before. You looked close, so why not ask her about it?”

I just stared at Benimori-san, at a loss for words. It seems that was all it took for her to figure it out.

“Oh! So it’s *her*!” She clapped her hands, bursting into a full-faced grin. “I *knew* it. I had a feeling it would be. She’s ridiculously pretty, after all. Hmm. Hmm.”

“U-Urghhh...”

“You’re so darned cute, Kamikoshi-san. That’s a real good face you just showed me. Let me get the bill for you.”

“I-I can’t do that! Not after you were kind enough to hear me out.”

“No, no, it’d be bad karma for me to let you pay now. But in exchange, do keep me in the loop. I’m down to chat more anytime you need it!”

Benimori-san really seemed to be enjoying herself. Even her skin seemed to glow. Staring at her in dumb amazement, I thought, *What is she? A youkai that lives by sucking up the stories of people’s love?*

4

The next day, Migiwa called me in to DS Research. They had found the budget to bring a construction vehicle into the Farm at Hannou, so we were going to have a meeting about that.

I opened the elevator panel with the key I’d been given and took it to the secret floor. When I dropped by his office, Migiwa looked up from his computer. “Are you alone?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“How unusual. I had expected Nishina-san would be with you.”

“Well, stuff happens.”

“I see. Please, have a seat.”

Maybe because of how bitter I’d found the espresso before, I was always served tea from an ordinary plastic bottle now. I was grateful, but it felt kinda awkward.

We talked about construction for a while. First, they’d bring heavy equipment up the mountain from the outside and build a slope into the basement where the Round Hole was. Runa’s cult had already started the work, so we’d finish it. Once that was done, we’d be able to send cars and materials from the underground parking lot in the DS Research building to the Round Hole. Then, we just had to close off

the mountain road so that no unauthorized people would come in.

The plan relied on the Round Hole being able to connect two distant points in space. Thinking about that, it was so unrealistic that I could only imagine the mental toil of the construction workers who had to play along with this.

“Maybe it’s a bit late to be asking, but will Torchlight be okay?”

Migiwa smiled at my question. “They have considerable experience. Although, I imagine the new hires will have a hard time of it.”

DS Research used a private military company called Torchlight Inc. that had registered the trade name Tomoshihi Engineering and made use of it when it was convenient.

Just as we had finished the meeting and I was planning to head back, Migiwa suddenly said, “Come to think of it, it has been some time since Uruma-san’s funeral.”

“Yeah... I guess it has, huh?”

“I perhaps should have said this sooner, but thank you again for all of your hard work in taking care of that matter.” Migiwa bowed his head to me.

“It was hard work, that’s for sure...” I said, then added, “But I’m sure it was even harder on Toriko and Kozakura.”

“And for Runa Urumi-san as well.”

I frowned when he said that. “As for her, well... I guess you could think of it as the bill coming due?”

“What do you mean?” Migiwa queried.

“In the sense that she had to pay for everything she’s done.”

“Certainly, yes.”

Right after the funeral, we were thrown out into the surface world. When I’d pulled up the map app on my phone and checked where we were, it was Kajuukuri Beach in Chiba Prefecture. Runa, who’d thrown up and passed out, regained consciousness shortly after that, but had suffered serious mental and physical shock, and was in no state to be moving around on her own, so I called Migiwa and had him come pick us up in his car. Everyone was dead tired, so we only gave him a brief report during the ride back, leaving the details for another time.

“How has everyone been since then?”

“I dropped in to check on Kozakura-san a few days later and she’d recovered by then. Toriko seems fine now too.”

“That is good to hear. I worried that Nishina-san was in no state to come with you today.”

“Oh, that’s something else entirely... How’s Runa holding up?”

“While there does not appear to be anything wrong with her physically, she has been in rather low spirits.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.”

I couldn’t blame her. Runa, who had messed up a lot of people’s lives, had also had her own life destroyed by Satsuki Uruma. The woman she’d worshiped murdered her mother, and almost killed her too, rendering everything she’d worked towards meaningless.

“We will have to wait for her to recover now. Time solves everything—or rather, is the only solution in this case.”

“So, we can just leave her alone for now, then, huh?” I said. Migiwa’s eyes narrowed with amusement.

“Why not drop in and show her your face on the way home? I believe she would be happy to see you.”

“Hrm, well, I’m not sure there’s any point in making her happy...” I drank the last of my tea and rose from my seat.

“Thank you for coming out today. Although, I do believe we will still have more to consult you about later.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. We’re the ones who asked you for a favor.”

As he was telling me I was free to come visit at any time, there was suddenly a knock at the office door. It opened before he could respond.

“Got a minute, Migiwa-kun?”

It was an unfamiliar woman—in her late thirties, maybe. She was casually dressed in a white shirt and skinny pants, and had very short hair. I also noticed a number of gaudy piercings in her ears. Her eyes widened a little as they turned towards me.

“Oh? Hmm? Would you happen to be Sorawo Kamikoshi-kun?”

“Yes?”

Who is she? And why does she know my name?

“Oh, good timing. Yes, this is Kamikoshi-san. I had still yet to introduce you to her. This is one of our researchers, Tsuji-san,” Migiwa said as I stared back at the woman in confusion.

“Hi there. I’m Tsuji,” she introduced herself in a playful tone.

“Uh, hi...”

“Tsuji-san handles the categorization and storage of UB artifacts for us.”

“So, that means...she manages the warehouse?”

UB artifacts—objects that Toriko and I picked up on the Otherside and brought back for DS Research to take possession of. I’d heard that there was someone who managed the warehouse, but I’d never actually met them.

While those things were a “meal ticket” for us, there was certainly some merit in studying them. But what field of study did they belong to? Physics, chemistry, psychology...?

“We had just finished our meeting. What was it you needed, Tsuji-

san?"

"I heard the Kamikoshi-kun that everyone's been talking about would be here, so I wanted to get a look at her myself." Tsuji looked around as she entered the room, asking, "Where's the other one? Toriko Nishina-kun, was it?"

"She did not come in today."

"Oh, huh? I'd heard they were a two-in-one kinda deal, so that's a surprise." Smiling, Tsuji looked down at me. "I've been wanting to meet you, but just couldn't find the opportunity. It's an honor to finally have the chance."

"Uh-huh..."

Tsuji stared at me as she went on, saying, "I mean, not only do you go to UBL and bring back artifacts, I've heard that you're even planning to set up bases there. I expected you to be some kind of big, strong woman, but you're nothing like that! Color me surprised!"

"Uh-huh... Is that a fact?"

"Yeah, from the way Migiwa-kun talks about you, I was imagining some kind of incredible outlaw."

"Surely, I have never described her in that way," Migiwa said, shaking his head with a strained smile.

"Sure, sure, but if *the* Migiwa-kun's always praising her, that makes it pretty clear what kind of person she is, right?"

"You could interpret my compliments in a more straightforward way."

"Is the kid not here today? You know, the one who appears and disappears."

"Kozakura-san took her in, so she is no longer in our custody."

"Oh, right, right. You did say that would be happening. That's some commitment from Kozakura-kun, huh?"

Judging by her casual tone, it seemed she knew Kozakura too.

"Do you and Kozakura-san know each other?" I asked.

"Sure. She's a real cutie, isn't she?"

I got a little confused, unsure if she meant Kozakura or Kasumi.

"Erm...? Do you mean Kozakura-san?"

"Yeah, yeah. She's always such a little bundle of rage. It's super adorable."

It was true that Kozakura was always angry, but I'd always just assumed Toriko and I were the cause of that. Was she the same way when we weren't around?

"So, you know, I've been thinking I'd like to sit down and have a proper conversation with you at least once. Do you have time now? Will you join me for tea?"

"For tea? Uhhh..."

Sensing my hesitation, Tsuji added, "Oh, we'd be talking about

work. It's about artifacts."

"Well, in that case... I guess."

"Oh, good. Okay, I'm gonna borrow her for a bit, Migiwa-kun."

The entrance to the UB artifact warehouse was in the lobby at the end of the hall on the same floor. One part of the wall was a sliding door, about four meters high by four meters wide, and inside were a set of stone stairs leading up. It was like the kind of entrance to a secret laboratory that you'd see in a horror game. Honestly, the design got me pretty hyped up. Although, now that I think about it, DS Research already was a secret lab, so there wasn't much to be getting all excited about at this point.

"If I recall, you've been in the warehouse once before, right?"

"Oh, yeah."

That was the time that Runa Urumi attacked DS Research.

"I didn't know what I was going to do that time," Tsuji said. "I thought about it, but the perpetrator ended up knocked out after being turned into a kuchisake-onna, and when I went to see her she was just a little brat. I couldn't lay a hand on her. It was a real disappointment."

I wonder what she planned to do if it had been someone she could lay a hand on?

The stairs led up into a display room. It was kept dimly lit, with rows of glass cases illuminated by spotlights. They all contained UB artifacts. Last time I was here, I had to wonder what kind of person thought to put inexplicable objects from the other world on display like this was a museum.

The answer, apparently, was someone like Tsuji.

I felt a little uneasy, following her wherever she said to. Although, I was curious about the artifacts too. I thought we would be going up the spiral staircase in the center, but Tsuji walked to a dark corner instead. When a sensor turned on the lights, I discovered an elevator that was painted yellow.

I hadn't noticed it the last time I was here. Back then, we'd left the unconscious Runa Urumi with Migiwa, and headed down the stairs ahead of them.

"Sorry to make you take the freight elevator, but please get in."

Once Tsuji pressed the up button, the elevator started to move. We passed another display floor, and then above that was the warehouse. Tsuji's office was on the floor above that.

I knew the layout because I'd been here before. Unlike the orderly display room below, the unsorted boxes and documents were piled up in a haphazard manner. It might have had that in common with Kozakura's room.

In the back of the room, beneath a latticed skylight, was a desk

surrounded by decorative plants.

Hm...?

Suddenly, something felt off. I thought I sensed something, a presence other than our own. Thinking it might be Otherside influence, I looked around with my right eye, and...

Oh, yeah, I guess that makes sense.

I could see silver phosphorescence all around the room. Of course I could. This was where they stored artifacts from the Otherside, after all.

With this many of them lying around, it was practically a given that I was going to sense a weird presence or two.

“Hold on a moment. I’ll get you a chair.”

Tsuji went and got a fold-out table and chairs, then she just handed them to me as is.

“Could you open those up for me?”

“Huh? Sure...”

Not seeing much other option, I set up the table and two chairs in the open space in front of her desk. Tsuji came back right then, as if she’d timed it that way. She held a tray with a tea set on it in one hand, and a pot in the other. Both looked like they should be heavy, but she carried them as if they were light.

“Have a seat. I’ll make tea.”

Oh, yeah. She did say, “Will you join me for tea?” I guess she really meant it...

Once I sat down as instructed, Tsuji began preparing the tea with experienced hands.

“It’s Taiwanese fruit tea. I hope you’ll find it to your liking.”

The tea leaves mixed with finely ground dried fruit danced around inside the glass teapot. This kind of tea was new to me, and as I was still focused on it a little plate of higashi sweets made its appearance too. They’re like those lumps of sugar used as offerings on a Buddhist altar.

“Kozakura-kun won’t drink tea without something sweet. Are you that way too, Kamikoshi-kun?”

“Not really.”

“To tell you the truth, I’d have liked to prepare it for you the proper way, but we’ll save that for another time. Sorry for cutting corners today. Here you go.”

“Oh, thank you...”

A fruity aroma rose from the tea she served me in this cute little cup that was kind of like a sake cup. Even though we were surrounded by bizarre objects from the other world, the warm tea almost triggered a reflexive feeling of relaxation.

That’s when I noticed Tsuji watching me as she took a sip of tea.

“Wh...What?”

“You have such a pretty eye.”

“...It’s dangerous to look at it too much.”

“Oh? That’s a shame. It’s so lovely.” Tsuji smiled, then continued, saying, “Do you want to have a staring contest, just to see what happens? Kamikoshi-kun.”

“Huh?”

“If you look away, you lose. Here we gooooo.”

I was only confused for a moment. Suddenly, Tsuji’s eyes froze. They looked straight at me, not moving in the slightest. I was completely frozen too, unable to move. Her gaze seemed to pierce through mine.

Normally, you’d expect a person’s eyes to be moving a little. No matter how much they try to focus, they can’t stop the subtle movements of their ocular muscles, and the pupils also dilate and constrict, moving on their own. Yet Tsuji’s eyes were completely still. Those two orbs, literally not moving a muscle, felt more like a pair of holes suspended in midair than the eyes of any living creature.

I dunno what’s up, but if that’s how she wants to be...!

I focused on my right eye and stared right back. I wouldn’t normally. My right eye drove people crazy. Even just looking at Akari a little had messed her up, and when I cast aside my hesitation and continuously focused my eye on Runa’s cult, they lost it so bad they started shooting one another. It was too dangerous, so I tried to avoid even looking at people directly as a general rule. So, if I just “looked” at Tsuji a little, she’d probably avert her eyes... Or so I thought.

“Ohhh, I see. This is what it’s like, huh?” Tsuji murmured. She wasn’t looking away! Not only was she not going mad, she didn’t even seem perturbed. Shocked as I was, I kept staring into her eyes out of stubbornness.

What is this? Damn it... I’m not gonna lose!



I leaned in, driven by a sense of competitiveness, but suddenly my field of vision was blocked.

That broke the line of sight connecting us.

"Hahhh...!" I reeled back, falling against the back of my chair for support.

"Ahh, I think I get it. This is the evil eye I've heard so much about, huh?" Tsuji lowered her hand. It was apparently her palm that had blocked my sight. I blinked repeatedly. When I looked at her afterwards, her eyes had gone back to normal—just human eyes, nothing special about them.

"Yeahhh, sorry about that. You okay, Kamikoshi-kun?"

At some point, tears had streamed down my cheeks to fall on my clothes. I closed my eyes and rubbed them to wipe away the tears.

"What'd you do just now...?"

"The evil eye. Though, mine's different from yours."

"So, are you a Fourth Kind too, then?" I asked, thinking, *But I didn't see anything in my right field of vision that would have suggested that.*

"It comes naturally to me," Tsuji said with a mischievous grin. "The evil eye is one of the fundamentals of magic training. You stare at the point of a needle, or a candle flame for hours on end as basic training. Any magician worth their salt can do it."

"Huh...? Magic? Really?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you? I'm a magician," Tsuji said casually, her eyes narrowing. "Your eye is still incredible, though. When I stare into it, it feels like there's pressure being exerted on the state of my mental integrity. It's common to intentionally muck around with that in magic and traditional religion too, but your eye's still ridiculously powerful, like its specialty is destroying other people. Scary stuff."

"I'm not entirely sure I get what you mean... Is this some kind of metaphor? You're not actually claiming that you can use magic, right?"

"I mean ordinary magic. Practical magic, you might call it. As for whether I can use it, maybe that depends on your definitions." Seeing the suspicion on my face, Tsuji smiled. "If you search for 'magick' on Amazon, you'll get a whole bunch of textbooks in the results. That's magick with a k. If the word magic sounds too shady, then maybe rewording that to 'a system of techniques for manipulating perceptual space' sounds better."

"If this is cult stuff, I'm leaving... The way you try to dress it up in vaguely scientific terms is more suspicious than anything."

"Magic societies have always tended to become cults. I suppose that makes me a cult of one? I've been doing this all this time without

ever taking an apprentice, after all,” Tsuji continued on in this aloof manner, deliberately ignoring how my attitude was hardening against her. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to do anything. Kozakura-kun would kill me if I laid a hand on her pet student. She’s already warned me off trying to drag young people into the occult. But it just seems so silly. It’s like, ‘Kozakura-kun, before you go getting mad at me, I think there are some other things you should be saying first.’ Right?”

Suddenly, Tsuji fixed me with a serious look.

“After all, you two are already setting foot in a *much* crazier place.”

5

I wasn’t sure exactly what she was calling crazy, so I got a little confused.

“You mean the Otherside?”

“What exactly do you think the UBL—what you call the Otherside—is, Kamikoshi-kun?”

Tsuji’s voice took on a seriousness that was completely different from everything before now. I looked back at her, not lowering my defenses.

“A place where beings beyond human knowledge appear borrowing the guise of ghost stories we’re familiar with, I guess?”

“That’s what it is to you, yes.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The UBL is different things to different people. They all have their own names for it, and they likely see different things.”

“Different things?”

“When you talk with Nishina-kun about the UBL, do you ever find that your own understanding of it doesn’t mesh?”

“Yeah, that does happen.”

“Of course, even as we’re sitting here now, across from one another, we’re both seeing different things. The idea that we see the same things is no more than an illusion. I don’t even need to bring up the overused example that there’s no way to prove that what I call red and what you call red are the same color. Humans don’t share the same reality, and in the modern era it’s common knowledge that they can’t. But.” Tsuji poured tea into our empty cups as she continued. “UBL is on another level from that. It messes with our perception. The reality we usually interact with is like the tea from this kettle. Even if the people drinking it have different preferences in regard to taste, their cups are all filled from the same source. But with UBL, there are times when things are so different that you have to doubt whether the tea’s even coming from the same kettle.”

I could think of a lot of examples. When we looked back to our experiences in the other world and the interstitial space, our stories were often different. Although I had assumed that was due to different phases of the Otherside, like with the revolving observation platform.

“There was a time when we passed through a bunch of places in rapid succession. They were all so different in look and feel, you could only imagine they were different worlds altogether. We called them the ‘phases’ of the Otherside. Could wandering into different phases be responsible for the different experiences people have?”

Tsuji nodded when I said this.

“It could. At the same time, there’s also signs that the state of the UBL is dependent on factors internal to the experiencer. Their traumas and hopes are projected onto it in some form—is that something you’ve experienced, Kamikoshi-kun?”

“I have. But I think there’s more to it than that.”

“By which you mean?”

“There are times I think it’s reflecting something internal to me. But when that happens, it’s like someone else read what’s inside me, and just tried leaving it out to see what would happen. It would be weird to say that it all came from inside of me. There are some elements that aren’t my own experiences mixed in, so I don’t think there’s any doubt that something other than me has an influence on it.”

“The elements have been rearranged by an outside party, you’re saying. That makes sense.”

“Part of it is just that I’d rather not think that the Otherside is a reflection of my own mind, though.”

“You don’t want to think that? Why not?”

“That’d be boring...”

“I get you.” Tsuji smirked at my answer. “I think I’m starting to see what kind of person you are, Kamikoshi-kun. You’re someone who’s always headed outwards. An explorer. You’re the type who, in another era, might have gotten a ship and crossed the sea.”

“Is that a fact?”

Maybe this reading of me was preferable to being called an outlaw or a person from the Sengoku Period.

“How about yourself, Tsuji-san? What did you experience when you went to the Otherside?”

“I’ve never been there.”

“You haven’t?”

“I can’t go. It seems the gates of UBL won’t open for me. I’ve thought about why that is, and come to something resembling an answer. I think that *this* is what the UBL is to me.” Tsuji gestured to the room as a whole. “The artifacts here—what you might call ‘objects

from the Otherside'—are my UBL. Probably.”

Seeing my confusion, Tsuji explained. “I started out as a collector of cursed objects.”

“Cursed objects...?”

“You’re familiar with ghost stories, so you must know. You hear a lot about cursed dolls, cursed swords, and such, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah, those do come up.”

“There are people who collect that kind of thing as a hobby. The people who have them *should* want to get rid of them, because they’re scared, but once you take them off their hands, it tends to be the case that they get possessive and it leads to trouble, or the cursed item returns to its owner by itself. It makes the items hard to manage. But being a magician myself, I just snipped those sorts of bonds and welcomed the objects into my collection.”

“R-Right...”

It was great that she explained it and all, but the volume of information was too much to process all at once and it was jamming up my brain.

“So, while I was doing that, Migiwa-kun came along and told me there was a workplace with all sorts of even wilder things, and invited me to come to DS Research. I was a curator before, so I set this place up like a private museum by force of habit.”

“Migiwa-san scouted you himself?”

“That’s right. You’re surprised?”

“I assumed that he wasn’t all that into the occult himself.”

“Did you know Migiwa-kun went to Central America when he was young?”

“I think I heard about that.”

“The reason he went over there was because he was influenced by Castaneda. He wanted to apprentice himself to a shaman. How adorable. He never talks about it himself, though, does he?”

“Huh? So, can Migiwa-san use shamanic magic?”

“Of *course* not. Are you all right? Anyone who talks about magic or sorcery is a faker. You can’t just go believing them.”

“Wha...”

“He doesn’t like to talk about the details, but whatever he experienced over there, he came back a delinquent. Everyone has their youthful indiscretions. So, anyway, that’s how I got invited to DS Research, and he showed me what he called ‘UB artifacts.’ They were all on a totally different level from the cursed items I’d seen before then, so I was really surprised.”

“What do you mean by a ‘different level’?”

“Well, you know how ‘the cursed whatever’ is generally something harmful to people, right? They’re called ‘cursed’ because they hurt or

kill their owners, or the people they're used on. But UB artifacts don't have that sort of purpose. They're simply bizarre on their own. Even the dangerous ones only ended up that way by coincidence."

"Well, yes, but don't some of them feel blatantly malicious?"

"Such as?"

"Like the Kotoribako?"

"Oh, *that* thing! The one that got carried off without me knowing." Tsuji leaned across the table. "It was her, right? Satsuki Uruma."

"You knew her?"

"Well, yeah. She was a researcher here too, after all. She was always out, though, so we only actually met a handful of times. She seemed like bad news, so I didn't try to get closer to her. For one thing, they say she's the one who picked up the Kotoribako."

"That's what I heard."

"There were a lot of UB artifacts that she picked up, but a number of them, like the Kotoribako, were a little *different*. Like, they were obviously meant to be 'cursed items.' Those, I don't think she picked up. I think she *made* them. In the UBL."

That surprised me to hear; the idea hadn't occurred to me before. But now that she mentioned it, the story checked out. On the way to Satsuki Uruma's funeral, Runa had said something similar—that we could make all the cursed items we wanted in the Otherside.

"Are there others like that? That feel manufactured the same way?"

"Yeah. There was one called the Rinfone, for instance. It was a 3D puzzle sort of thing. Do you know it?"

"I do... There's a ghost story that goes by that name."

"It was weird that it came with a name already, you know? That seemed suspicious to me, so I kept it separate from the others. I went, 'This Satsuki Uruma, she's up to something.'"

"Up to something?"

"I didn't hear this directly from her, but they say the main place she searched for UBL gates was in accident-prone properties. This is a bit awkward to bring up, but in our industry, it's really common to use real estate companies to set something up. Stuff like filling in old wells to make these crazy plots of land, or deliberately building houses with bad layouts to experiment on people. That's what made it click for me. 'Ohh, she's up to something. And it isn't good.' So I went, 'Yikes, I'm not gonna get too involved.'"

While there was so much information that it was hard to process it all, I felt a little bit relieved. I had been getting worried about what to do if she turned out to be yet another Satsuki Uruma fangirl.

It was hard to decide which was less bad: another Satsuki fanatic,

or a self-proclaimed magician who collected inexplicable cursed items, though...

"But still, those sorts of manufactured ones were only a small fraction of the artifacts. Most are just kind of weird objects. The same kind you two bring in. So, the question is, what are these things? I'll tell you what I think: each UBL artifact is like a mini UBL."

"Huh? What do you mean...?"

"If you mix oil and water, they gradually separate over time. During that process, when they haven't fully separated yet, there's a point where there's little balls of oil inside the water. I think maybe that's what UBL artifacts are."

"A bit of the other world left behind in this one, you're saying?"

"I don't know that they're 'left behind.' So the analogy might not be accurate, but it's one way of interpreting things. Now, as for why I thought that way... Well, I said that different people come into contact with the UBL in different ways, didn't I? That might be because the differences in cognition between them leads them to connect via different channels. For you, that channel is ghost stories, while for me it's cursed items."

"And that's why you can't go to the Otherside yourself, Tsuji-san?"

"Yeah. Instead, my contact is through UB artifacts. Basically, different interfaces for different people."

Interface.

That was a word that came out of Kasumi's mouth too. The point where two different regions touch...

"In that case, the Otherside objects may be a sort of border region. The point where the two worlds touch, taking on a different form."

"Yes," Tsuji agreed. "But I'd like to take it one step further."

"One step further?"

"What I want to say is that maybe the UBL is, itself, an interface," Tsuji went on, seemingly talking as much to herself as to me. "In modern magic, there are those who call the greatest common denominator among the realities humans see the consensus reality. The term refers to what we can agree is reality by consensus. I feel like in UBL, that 'consensus' isn't taking place between humans, but between humans and something on the other side of the UBL. I suspect our consensus reality might be taking the form of UBL..."

I felt a dizziness sucking me into the center of my head. I had to close my eyes tight so as not to lose consciousness.

"Are you okay...thinking like that, Tsuji-san?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Whenever I think about...whatever it is that exists on the other side of the UBL, it really strains my brain. It messes with my head, and sometimes I even lose consciousness..."

There was no response for a while. After the several seconds it took me to recover, I looked up. Tsuji was looking back at me.

"You know... I already said this, but the two of you really have set foot in a crazy place, huh?"

"Kozakura-san is always telling us off because of it."

"When I say crazy, I don't just mean dangerous. It's incredible too."

"What do you—"

"Kamikoshi-kun, you're probably at the forefront of first contact."

"You want to say it's aliens on the other side of the Otherside?"

"First contact isn't something that only happens with space aliens. You study cultural anthropology, right, Kamikoshi-kun? I think the term originated in anthropology. Or am I mistaken?"

"Did it?"

I don't think I'd heard it come up in any of my lectures, at least.

"Yeah, I dunno. It could be that they really are space aliens. At the very least, given how our consensus reality turns out, they've got to be something completely inhuman. And I think, at present, you and Nishina-kun are the ones most deeply involved with them."

Could be, I thought, easily able to accept that. I don't know what it was like for other people, but we were going in deeper and deeper as we explored the Otherside. I was aware of that. Like Tsuji was saying, out of all the humans who'd made contact with the other world, we might be the ones at the vanguard.

Once upon a time, that position was probably held by Satsuki Uruma. Now that she was gone, we were forced into that spot, like it or not...

"Of course, this could all be my wild imaginings. That might even be the most likely thing. I don't understand the meaning of most things involving the UBL, and they may not even *mean* anything."

"..."

"But if there's a will on the other side of it, then it wouldn't be strange if it were to try and contact us on this side. The UB artifacts may be an attempt at contact. The sort of glitches that kill you if you touch them may be due to a failure to understand on their part. No, if they're tests and experiments meant to probe our reactions, even that might not be a failure."

Tsuji paused to think for a moment before continuing.

"There are many kinds of contact. Conversation, sex, war. Infection, trade, religion... Who chooses which kind it will be? Us, or the other side? Is there even room to make a decision? Or are we inevitably constricted into some specific form?"

Having said all this, Tsuji suddenly smiled.

"I'm glad we could have this talk today. Come play again

anytime.”

6

I didn’t manage to stop pondering over it and come back to my senses until after I’d left DS Research.

I felt caught in a haze. Was it because I’d directed too much of my attention at what lay beyond the Otherside during my conversation with Tsuji? I didn’t recall saying goodbye to Migiwa on my way out.

Come to think of it, I missed my chance to see Runa too. It’s not like I was totally against dropping by for just a second.

Well, maybe next time... I’ve got my hands full with my own worries.

I pulled out my smartphone. No contact from Toriko. That was expected, but it still made me feel antsy, even though it wouldn’t usually bug me so much.

What should I do? Seriously.

Yesterday’s talk with Benimori-san was honestly pretty interesting. Hearing an opinion from a completely different perspective was fresh. If I had asked Migiwa, or Tsuji, who I’d never met before, for advice on the same topic, what would they have told me? I couldn’t imagine—not that I’d ever do it.

Should I ask someone else? Kozakura? Hmmm. I can’t imagine her not lecturing me about it, so I’m not all that big on the idea...

Mulling over it as I walked to the station, I suddenly noticed a human figure cowering under the streetlight up ahead.

“Huh...?”

That blonde hair covering her back. Even crouching, and at a distance, I knew her at a glance. It was clearly Toriko.

“Toriko? Huh? What’s up? What are you doing there?” I called out to her as I approached.

Toriko continued cowering and didn’t respond.

Ah-hah, I thought. She hadn’t been planning to see me for a week, but then she happened to be heading to DS Research and ran into me on my way back. With nowhere to hide, she just hunkered down, unable to move forward or retreat—is that it?

It probably was, more or less. I caught myself feeling relieved at unexpectedly seeing Toriko, even if it was just from behind.

Wait... Is it okay for me to be thinking like that?

I still hadn’t sorted out my feelings at all, but I couldn’t pretend not to notice Toriko when she appeared in front of me. I stopped in front of her cowering back, then called out to her again.

“Hey, Toriko—”

That’s when something struck me as off.

There was a noise. The wind...maybe?

I heard a slight flow of air, like the breeze through the grass, or a draft in an abandoned building, coming from somewhere.

It wasn't a sound you heard downtown.

It was a sound I'd heard time and again on the Otherside.

"Toriko, are you hearing—"

As I looked down, putting my hand on her shoulder, I realized.

The wind was coming from Toriko. The sound of a draft was coming, intermittently, from her hung head, from the downturned face I couldn't see.

"Tori...ko?"

The head that hadn't moved until now rose, slowly beginning to turn. Her sleek golden locks brushed against my hand on her shoulder. The sound of a draft gradually grew louder, to the point that it was the only thing I could hear. As the sound of wind drowned everything else out, like hearing the flow of blood in my own ears, Toriko's face turned, and I saw it.

There was no face there.

There was nothing.

"Are you all right?"

I came back to my senses as someone called out to me from behind.

Huh? I was...

I was cowering beneath a streetlamp. Just like Toriko was before. I turned to look. There was a stranger in a suit, looking concerned.

"Are you all right? You're not hurt anywhere, are you?"

"Oh, sorry... It's nothing. I'm fine," I answered. The stranger left with a look of relief on their face.

I stood up. In the same place as before. There was no Toriko here—just me. The time was...

"You're kidding me," I uttered without meaning to as I checked the clock. Two hours had passed. When?

"It's a mujina..." I murmured in a haze. What I'd just encountered was unquestionably the phenomenon that was known as a mujina.

That wasn't the only shock: I was bowled over by a reality that I instinctively understood the moment I saw a phenomenon take on Toriko's form.

I'm scared.

Yes, that's right.

I was scared of Toriko.

File 25: Learn Your Lesson

1

The mujina.

Originally, in ancient Japan, it was an animal that was said to deceive people, like the fox or tanuki. There is no modern animal by that name because it was an alternate name for the tanuki, or the badger—there was regional variation in what animal was known as the “mujina.” Perhaps due to that ambiguity, that made it all the more unknowable, and as a result, in the modern period, it came to be treated as a fictional beast, or a youkai.

It had a distinctive feature as a youkai—it transformed into a person, but often without a face, like the nopperabou.

There was a famous story that appeared in *Kwaidan* by Yakumo Koizumi: a man comes across a woman who is hunched over, crying by the roadside at night, and he calls out to her, concerned. When the woman turns, she has no eyes, nose, or face. The man runs off in a panic, fleeing into a soba place that has its lanterns lit. When the man says he just had a frightful experience, the owner says, “Did her face look like this?” and turns to reveal that his face also has no eyes, nose, or mouth. And just as he does, the lights go out.

The title of that story was “Mujina.”

If this were someone else’s problem, it would be fascinating—there weren’t just old folk tales, but also multiple true ghost stories that were similar. Including the element of a person crouching at the foot of a utility pole.

The details of the face when they turn around vary from story to story. A face that’s smooth like a peeled egg. A face with no eyes, nose, or mouth, but noticeable pores. Or even a bizarre face with all the parts rearranged...

I think all the commonalities and minute differences in these experiences are really interesting.

If this were happening to someone else...

I don’t know how I got home after that. The next thing I knew it was morning, and I awoke in my own bed. That’s just how much the experience shook me, apparently.

But the shocking part of it wasn’t encountering a mujina, but the fact that I was afraid of Toriko.

I had faced horrors from the other world several times before. I

often knew the original stories they were based on, but even with that knowledge they'd all been super scary experiences.

I had only been able to take them on because Toriko was there.

She must have been scared too, but she always stuck there by my side, holding my hand. Even when it looked like fear might win out in the end, one look at Toriko's face was all it took to make it all okay again.

How could I be afraid of *Toriko*?

I thought I might have screwed something up, made her fed up with me. I'm not exactly a confident person, after all. But I never thought it was so bad I'd recoil at the sight of her.

I'm scared.

Scared of what? Of meeting her face to face? Of talking? Of touching?

I curled up in a ball in bed, thoughts racing through my head. I remembered what Toriko said during Satsuki Uruma's funeral.

"I don't want to touch you now, and I don't want you touching me either. So, yeah... It was over. I mean, if I don't want to touch you, if that's how I feel, then... We're through, right?"

Is that it? Is it no good between Toriko and me anymore? That's absurd.

That can't be right.

Well, can I call her right now, talk over the phone?

Looking at my smartphone—I hesitated.

Is it okay to call when she said she wouldn't contact me for a week?

What do I do if she gives me the cold shoulder? Or, alternatively, what if she just carries on chatting normally, as if nothing ever happened?

I'd never thought like this before.

Is this...what it's like to be scared? I don't think so. This isn't fear, at least. It's uncertainty, sure. For some reason, I've become timid.

Come to think of it, since the aberration appeared in Toriko's form, I should check in on her. No doubt about that.

I made up my mind, and...didn't call. Instead, I texted her. "You doing okay?"

It got marked as read. Then, seconds later, she sent a stamp of a cat forming a circle with both its paws, meaning yes.

That was it.

She didn't ignore me outright, but she apparently wasn't going to put in any more than the bare minimum effort to respond. I saw how it was.

Still, it was a bit of a relief. I'd overcome my timidity for now, and even got a response I could kind of understand. And it looked like the mujina hadn't showed up at Toriko's place, so...

"What the heck...?"

Why was I making excuses to myself, and for what?

I didn't understand.

It's not like me. This isn't me. Maybe I've gone crazy. I don't want to think about it anymore.

No, but if I keep dragging my feet, I get the feeling another mujina is going to show up looking like Toriko. If it happened in my room, that'd be the worst. Yeah, that's right. I can't be passive when it comes to the Otherside. If I get timid, they'll do me in.

Maybe it's the same way when it comes to Toriko?

That suspicion suddenly arose in my mind.

That...could be true. But they're two different things. Totally different...!

While I was thinking things that didn't even qualify as excuses, I dragged myself out of bed and headed to the kitchen. For now, I had to head to my university.

So I went, but there was no way I was going to be able to focus. With the precedent set by T-san, I could imagine I might run into a mujina again somewhere, and, more importantly, I still had no way of resolving my current issues. Talking with Benimori-san felt like it had cleared the fog a little, but maybe that had just been an illusion?

Once my afternoon lectures were over, I left the university feeling dead tired. The evening sky was heavy with clouds. The rainy season was late in coming this year, and we weren't getting much precipitation even now that it was June.

As I was thinking I'd buy some prepared foods from the supermarket, then head home like usual—suddenly, I came to a stop. I'd just remembered Benimori-san's advice that I should talk to other people about it too.

Come to think of it, there was one candidate in my tiny social circle who I could ask. Akari. The girl adored me, so if I talked to her about it, maybe she'd give me some advice that really took my interests to heart...

Err... Would she? I was a bit iffy on that.

I don't think her attachment to me is romantic. I know I'm not the most observant when it comes to these things, but that can't be it. But at the same time, it's hard to predict how she'll react when I ask her. There's no doubt she'll want to know who we're talking about, and her frank and strangely warped personality might cause her to blow up in ways I'm not anticipating. Not that there's anything specific I'm worried she'd do... But on the other hand, I can't deny that just being around me makes her act weird, so... Yeah, no, I guess I shouldn't.

One of the big reasons I was able to talk to Benimori-san was that there's a certain distance between us. This is the kind of thing where it's actually harder to go to someone I'm close to for advice. I don't want to talk about it with them.

Hold on... Come to think of it, I do have another acquaintance in the area. We aren't that close, and there's a certain distance between us. Maybe I'll try getting her opinion.

As I was thinking this, I kept walking past my usual supermarket.

"Huh? Kamikoshi-senpai?"

Natsumi, who had been looking at a clipboard in the garage of the Ichikawa Automobile Repair Shop, furrowed her brow when she noticed me. "What're you doing here?"

"Do you have a moment, Ichikawa-san?"

"What's up?"

"I was hoping you'd hear me out on something. Is now a good time?"

Natsumi set her clipboard down on the tool wagon and fixed me with a suspicious look. "Hear you out about what?"

"I need some advice, actually."

"Oh, is this about cars?"

"Nah, it's about, uh, what would you call it...? Interpersonal relationships?"

"Interpersonal relationships?" Natsumi repeated the words dubiously.

"Yeah. Oh, I'll buy you some food."

"Right..." For some reason, that made Natsumi *more* suspicious.

"It's fine if you're busy," I told her.

"I guess it must be pretty important, huh? Since you've gone out of your way to come here."

"Well..." I trailed off. It was really important to me, but probably didn't matter to Natsumi.

Natsumi turned around and shouted, "Hey, old man! Sorry, I'm gonna head out for a bit."

From the back of the garage full of vehicles being repaired, someone responded. "What about dinner?"

"I'll eat while I'm out! Let Mom know too."

Natsumi's parents were supposed to have gotten hurt pretty badly during the Sannukikano incident. Had it been half a year since? I was glad to see they'd both been safely discharged from the hospital.

Natsumi turned back to me. "Could you wait for me to go get changed?"

Five minutes later, Natsumi came back after changing from her jumpsuit into a tracksuit. "Where're we going to eat?" she asked.

"How does a tavern sound?"

"Works for me."

I'd looked up nearby places on my phone while waiting. We were a good distance from the station here, but it was close to the university, so there were a number of taverns. From the options

available, I picked out a place that did fried skewers where we wouldn't have to worry too much about the price.

We headed inside and sat down across from one another at a table. It was superbly awkward being alone with her, but she seemed to feel the same way, so I decided not to sweat it.

I ordered a highball. Natsumi got a lemon sour.

"Well then..."

"Kay."

After that unclear toast, Natsumi spoke up. "So..."

"Uh, right. Hear me out."

"Okay."

"I've been worried about something lately."

"You, Senpai?"

"And I thought it would be good to get your opinion, Ichikawa-san."

"Why me?"

I obviously couldn't say it was because we weren't that close. "It's because I feel like you'll be able to give me an objective opinion."

"Objective... Ohh, well, yeah, since we're not that close."

She holds back even less than I do. Well, that's good in its own way, though.

"So, you said interpersonal relationships. Who're we talking about here? That's what I wanna know first... This about Akari?" Natsumi asked, unable to hold the question in.

Oh, she was worried about that... I thought to myself, feeling like I understood.

"No, no," I reassured her. "This has nothing to do with Akari."

"Oh... Huh. I see. I was sure it was gonna be..." Natsumi said, deflated. She reached for the edamame that we got as an appetizer.

"Yeah, it's got nothing to do with her. This is something more abstract."

"Right... What are you talking about?"

"This is going to sound like a silly question, but what do you think is the difference between friends and lovers?"

Natsumi's hand stopped halfway to her mouth.

"Between friends...and lovers?"

"Yeah."

"That's...a hard one, yeah," Natsumi said with a serious look on her face. "Real hard..."

"It's that tough?"

Natsumi glared at me as I sat there confused. "Why're you asking?" she demanded. "You're not messing with me, are you?"

"No, not at all...? Why would you think that?"

"Because... Aw, shit." Natsumi hung her head, drinking alcohol in

silence for a while, then, suddenly, she raised her head again. "Fine, I'm gonna come right out with it. You're lesbian, right?"

"Come again?"

"You're not?"

"Uhh... I dunno."

"You don't know?"

"I've...never thought about it."

"You're kidding, right?" Natsumi looked at me with open doubt on her face.

"I wouldn't normally be so blunt about this. But you're the one who came to me, Senpai. I can't say anything if you're not gonna be clear about it."

Natsumi leaned across the table.

"So, how about it? You don't look like the type, Senpai, but from what I'm hearing, sounds to me like you're a raging lesbian."

"What did you hear that makes you think that?!"

The platter of skewers chose just that moment of confusion to arrive. Natsumi sat back down in her chair, staring at me as she munched a chicken skewer.

"You're saying I'm wrong? Okay, tell me who's your one and only then."

"My one and only...?"

"Whose woman are you, Senpaiiii...?"

"You drunk already?"

"Please don't dodge the question. I'm serious here."

"I'm nobody's woman."

"Sigh. That's what you're gonna say, huh?"

"What?"

"Well, what's Nishina-senpai to you, then?"

Seeing me at a loss for words, Natsumi put on a mocking smile.

"See? It's just like I thought, isn't it?"

"No, it's not."

"How isn't it?"

"It's just not, okay!" I raised my voice without meaning to. Then, lowering it, I continued, "That's what I wanted to get your advice on. Don't just decide things for me."

"That's what you wanted to get my advice on...?" Natsumi repeated, seemingly not getting it. "Huh? Then... Wait, hold on, you two aren't going out yet? Still???"

"We aren't!"

"You've gotta be shitting me?! Huh? Seriously?!"

I let out a sigh, exhausted already. I may have chosen the wrong person.

"Huh? So when you asked the difference between friends and

lovers... That wasn't about me?"

"About you? I have no idea what you mean."

"Oh... You don't, huh... I was so sure..." Natsumi suddenly covered her face. "Ohh... So that's how it is, huh? Ugh... I wish I could just die..."

"What are you on about?"

"I was totally hung up on myself. I'm so sorry."

"Right..."

Natsumi bowed her head to me as I sat there totally bewildered.

"Did I say something about you, Ichikawa-san?"

"No, you didn't. You didn't, buuut..." Natsumi mumbled indistinctly, then looked up at my face. Her eyebrows were drooping.

"Akari's, like, super important to me..."

"Yeah, that's easy to see."

"I love her."

"Okay then..."

"Whaddaya mean, 'Okay then.'"

"Whoa, whoa. Sorry. Uh, I think that's nice."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Uh-huh, yeah."

"Akari's a cutie."

"Real cute, sure."

"You thought so too, then, Senpai?"

"Huh?"

"You were gunning for her."

"Was not. Your face is scary."

"I mean, Akari's attached to you, isn't she, Senpai?"

"Sure she is. As my kouhai."

"Is that really all it is?"

"Listen! I'm going to be blunt here, but I don't have any feelings for Akari, or anything like that, okay?!"

When I said that so emphatically, Natsumi screwed her face up like she was dissatisfied about something. "Well, what then? You're saying I've been feeling uneasy this whole time, just getting jealous for no good reason?"

"Yes!"

Natsumi crumpled again at my response. "So that's how it was..."
Seriously, what is with her?

"That thing you said, the difference between friends and lovers? I've been agonizing over it this whole time too. We've been close since we were little, and Akari really respects me. I've wanted to ask her to go out with me as my girlfriend so many times. But I can't do it, you know? I just can't come out and say it. My love for her and her love for me are different. I just know it."

Natsumi started telling me something I never asked. I just chewed on a skewer and listened respectfully.

“Akari’s a nice girl, so I don’t think she’d hate me for asking. I trust her not to do that. But once she rejects me, or just lets it go by with a vague response, it’d definitely be a little awkward, you know? Maybe Akari’d forget it, but I never could. It’d absolutely sour things.”

As I sat there silently listening, she glared at me. “Say something, would you?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah... Must be rough, huh?”

When suddenly prompted to comment, that was all I could come up with.

“Yeah, you’re right... It is rough.”

I thought she was going to get mad again, but Natsumi nodded earnestly. I didn’t know if she was a pain in the butt or easy to deal with.

“How about you, Senpai?”

“What do you mean, about me?”

“Your relationship with Nishina-senpai. Quit playing dumb every time it comes up.”

“I’m not really playing dumb,” I shot back, getting miffed at her aggressive attitude.

“You’re the one who went and brought up the difference between friends and lovers, Senpai.”

“Yeah, I don’t care anymore. Forget about it.”

“Huh? What’re you chickening out for? You came to me because you need advice about something, right? Out with it already.”

I hesitated for some time, then finally broke my silence. “So, listen...”

“Yeah.”

“Toriko, she asked me to tell her how I feel about her.”

“Right... How do you feel about her?”

“See, that’s the thing. I dunno.”

“Right... Huh? Whaddaya mean?” Natsumi furrowed her brow.

“Toriko said that she loves me. In a romantic way.”

“She confessed her feelings, huh? Good for you two.”

“But I dunno how I feel.”

“Now I’m getting pissed.”

“Why?”

“Don’t give me that. She told you how she feels, right? Now it’s just a matter of whether you’re going to do her or she’s going to do you, isn’t it?”

“I-Is it?”

“Got a bit ahead of myself there. No... If she’s confessed her feelings, you’ve either gotta give her the OK, and go out with her, or

reject her.”

“Hrmm... If I reject her, what happens then?”

“You’re planning to reject her?”

“We’re talking hypothetically here. Hypothetically.”

“I don’t know, but... It’d get a bit awkward, I guess...?”

“Yeah, so I figured...”

“You gonna reject her?”

“Hrmm... Before it gets to that, I dunno how I even feel.”

“Which is why you asked the question about friends and lovers, huh? Are you one of *those*, Senpai? The people who don’t experience sexual desire or romantic attraction.”

“Yeah... I don’t know.”

“I hear they exist.”

“You’re awfully knowledgeable about this...”

“Huh? Well, when you start looking this stuff up, you learn all sorts of things in the process, you know?”

“I’ve never looked it up.”

“Hold on, didn’t you learn about it in sex ed?”

“I wasn’t exactly going to school much.”

Natsumi stared at me, surprised. “You’re surprisingly innocent, Senpai... I may’ve been wrong about you.”

Just what kind of image did she have of me?

“So, wait, you have no romantic feelings for Nishina-senpai? I thought you two were super close. If you two act like that, and then it turns out you weren’t into her at all, I’m gonna have to feel bad for her.”

“It just isn’t clicking for me...”

“Huh? Talk about a nice problem to have. You really are pissing me off here.”

“Why...?”

“Okay, let’s say it’s impossible for you to go out with her. Would you be okay with Nishina-senpai ending up with another woman?”

“Huh? No, I’d hate that,” I blurted out reflexively.

“You’d hate it, huh? Well, guess you’re going to have to bite the bullet and go out with her then.”

“Hrmm... Can’t things be like they’ve always been...?”

“Senpai. That pisses me off more than anything,” Natsumi said with restrained anger. “I think it took a lot of courage for Nishina-senpai to tell you how she feels. I know you two’ve been close all this time, but she wants to move on to the next stage with you. It’s awfully selfish to ignore that and want things to stay the way they are. That’s only taking the parts you like, isn’t it?”

“Urgh.”

“Even if you reject her, maybe Nishina-senpai’ll feel that she has

to act the way she always has, on the surface, at least. Because she loves you. But if you do that, you've gotta accept it when she finds someone else who's going to be more important to her than you are."

She...might be right about that. Natsumi's reasoning was sound. But I couldn't do it. I didn't even want to think about Toriko drifting away from me.

"If you really can't accept Nishina-senpai's feelings, I'd feel bad for her if you didn't just come out and say so. You've gotta set her free from you, Senpai."

"Set her free..."

"If you don't, she'll be tied down to you forever. *You* might be fine with that, but do you think Nishina-senpai would be happy that way? It's just not healthy."

"Urgh."

"Okay, level with me. What's wrong with going out with her? It's not that you have someone else you like, right? If you're not, like, totally put off by her on a biological level, why not try it? If it doesn't work out, maybe you end up breaking up, but at least that's moving forward, isn't it? For both of you. Otherwise, you're just gonna be treading water in the same place forever, aren't you?"

"You think...?"

"Yeah, I think."

I get what she's saying. And fair enough. I think she's right. But there's something about it that doesn't sit right with me, and I can't put what it is into words.

While I burned with frustration as she lectured me, Natsumi got more and more intoxicated. As the alcohol spread through her, the sermon which included her own feelings for Akari and self-ridicule repeated itself over and over. The percentage of complaining involved rose, and as I listened, unable to argue back, Natsumi finally collapsed on the table, dead drunk.

"Whoa... You okay? Can you make it back home?"

"I'm, fine. Toootally fine," she said, her speech slurred.

"You don't look fine."

"'Cuz I've got Akari with me."

"She's not here, though?"

"Why's she not here? Call 'er here, Senpai. Take responsibility!"

There was nothing else I could do, so I texted Akari. She showed up at the tavern in person, not ten minutes later, totally out of breath.

"Wha?! You two really were drinking together! What gives? No fair! I'd have wanted to join you too!"

"Uhh, sorry. It just kinda worked out this way..." I mumbled, not wanting to get interrogated as to how this happened. Akari put a hand on Natsumi's shoulder as she laid with her head down on the table.

“Hey, Nattsun. You okay?”

“It’s Akari... Huh, what’re you doin’ here?”

“I came to get you. Time to go home.”

“I don’t wannaaaa.”

“Jeez. Sorry, Senpai. I’ve never seen Nattsun this drunk in public before. She’s not normally like this.”

“Nah, I should apologize. It’s not like I tried to stop her.”

“Here, have some water. Can you stand?”

Natsumi stood up, borrowing Akari’s shoulder for support. Once we’d settled the bill, the three of us headed outside.

“I love you, Akariiii.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“I love youuuu.”

“I know, I know.”

Brushing all of this off, Akari continued lending Natsumi her shoulder as they walked.

In terms of overall closeness, these two were pretty close too. The way Akari looked at Natsumi, the way she talked to her, they seemed so very gentle, and loving to me.

For a moment, I considered asking. How did Akari feel about Natsumi? Did she know that when Natsumi said she loved her, she meant it romantically?

But I couldn’t ask. Maybe she hadn’t noticed, maybe she was only dimly aware...

Maybe she knew, but was pretending not to, so as to keep her relationship with Natsumi the same as it had ever been.

Or perhaps she enjoyed seeing Natsumi tormented by the affection that Natsumi felt for her.

Was that reading too much into it? Yeah, probably. I don’t think Akari’s that warped. But I don’t know. Anything’s possible.

Watching from behind as the two of them walked so close to one another, I started to feel lonely.

Toriko, Benimori-san, Natsumi and Akari—I felt like everyone seemed to go crazy once “romance” got involved.

Will I end up like that too? Or am I already crazy?



“You know about the suspension bridge effect, right?” Kozakura asked and I nodded. “I’ve always chalked your relationship up to that.”

“My relationship with Toriko?”

“In the same way people misidentify their fear of the shaky bridge as romantic attraction, you two have convinced yourselves that your experiences on the Otherside are a shared bond—that’s how it looked to me. At first, anyway.”

I’d come to Kozakura’s house in Shakujii-kouen, fully prepared to accept some lecturing in order to get the opinion of someone older than myself.

“When you say ‘at first,’ does that mean something changed?”

“My opinion now is ‘it’s out of my hands at this point.’”

“You’re bad-mouthing us, right?”

“Sure am,” Kozakura confirmed sullenly.

Illuminated by the light of her multiple monitors, she sat with her back hunched, holding a mug of hot cola. Just like when I first visited this house. Come to think of it, it was June then too.

“If you don’t like that, let me rephrase it to ‘it’s too late’ or ‘they’re beyond help.’”

“That’s still sounding derogatory.”

“I’d want to call it a codependent relationship, but the two of you are surprisingly frank about it. You’re not mentally unwell in a way that’s easy to understand, at least. If anything, you two are too insensitive.”

“I don’t know about me, but isn’t Toriko pretty sensitive in some ways?”

“‘Sensitive’ people don’t go to the Otherside carrying firearms. That word’s meant for describing people like me.”

“You? Sensitive?”

“What’s that look for?”

“Nothing.”

“I always thought of myself as an oddball who couldn’t conform to society’s expectations of her. Until the two of you walked into my life, trudging all over it with your muddy boots, that is. I got over myself real fast once I learned there were weirdos out there who were way above my level. It turned out I was an incredibly ordinary, common-sense, social person.”

“I don’t know that I’d go that far.”

“You picking a fight?”

“For one thing, I don’t think we’d call someone who’s stashing a shotgun under their floor a ‘common-sense person.’”

“Did you get a little cleverer, Sorawo-chan?”

“What kind of person do you think I am?”

Kozakura decided to get the conversation back on track without addressing my complaint. “The thing is, the suspension bridge effect may have just lasted a long time. Continuously exposing yourself to dangerous places kept the fear going, as well as the heightened emotions. Or it might be the other way around. You could be keeping the terror coming in order to maintain those emotional highs.”

“You make it sound like an addiction.”

“Can you say that’s totally wrong?”

“That’s not what the Otherside is for me, at least.”

After looking at my face, Kozakura made a sour expression. “Yeah. I know. You’ve just got a genuine interest in the other world, Toriko or no Toriko.”

“Yeah. That’s right.”

“Which makes it all the worse.”

“Huh...?”

“If you were using the Otherside as an excuse to flirt with her, that’d be insensitive and awful, but I’d at least be able to understand. There are people who would take their dates out on tests of courage or to haunted houses, after all. But if it’s not even for that, and you’re frequenting the other world out of mere curiosity, I can’t even imagine it.”

“You’re interested too, aren’t you, Kozakura-san?”

“People with an interest in medical science don’t want to get sick themselves. And military researchers aren’t looking to go to war either. That’s the kind of thing you’re doing, Sorawo-chan. I mean, even if *you’re* fine with that, what about Toriko? Originally she was going there to search for Satsuki, but she doesn’t have that motivation anymore. Have you two ever talked about that?”

“A bit. Even without thinking about Satsuki-san, Toriko seems to be enjoying the Otherside too, so I think it’s fine.”

Kozakura looked exasperated. “Yeah, it’s too late for you two.”

“Listen, that’s not what I came to talk to you about today...”

“What?”

“Like I said, I was hoping to get your opinion on what I should do with Toriko from now on...”

“Don’t know. Don’t care.”

“I thought that someone who didn’t care might be able to provide an objective opinion.”

“Doesn’t matter to me. Why don’t you just go out already?”

“The total lack of interest hurts a little...”

“Ugh, you’re such a *pain!*” Kozakura irritably set down her mug before turning to face me again. “Toriko probably only says the Otherside’s fun because you’re going there with her, Sorawo-chan.”

“You...could be right about that.”

“There’s no ‘could’ about it. While she definitely has some degree of tolerance for that place, she’s not the type to go exploring there on her own. She goes because you go. Think about it. If you died, do you think she’d keep going to the other world all by herself?”

When she put it that way, no, I didn’t.

“On the other hand, if Toriko died, I’ll bet you’d still keep on going after that.”

I had to agree with that too. I didn’t want to imagine Toriko dying, but I probably *would* keep going.

“Toriko knows you’re like that too. It’s what makes her uneasy, and why she wants to be reassured.”

“What could I do to reassure her?”

“She’s going to be worried until she knows what she is to you, until she knows what your relationship is, and it has some clearly defined shape.”

“A..shape?”

“I don’t know what Toriko’s thinking, but there are things you could do, like make her your girlfriend, or go get married in Canada, or something, right? That kind of development. If you don’t want that, then how about you stop dragging things out and reject her already?” Kozakura said offhandedly.

“Natsumi said the same thing. That I’ve gotta decide to go out with her or reject her.”

“You’ve already got the right answer, then. Is there any need for me to say more?”

“I kind of hate people telling me to go out with her.”

“You’re the one who asked, aren’t you?!”

“No, I don’t mean it that way. When I ask about what I should do with Toriko and people give me that kind of cookie-cutter answer... It kind of rubs me the wrong way.”

“When it comes to positive human relationships, romance is the most powerful and easy to understand, after all.”

“You’re all hoping for other people to be easy to understand, then?”

“To put this in a way that’s somewhat insightful, the reason that outsiders say to hurry up and date or get married is because two people continuing that sort of unstable relationship makes it hard for those around them to know how they’re supposed to interact with them. That’s why they pressure them to hurry up and settle for one of the relationship packages that society has prepared for you.”

“You were doing some of that pressuring just now, huh?”

“Of course I’d want to. Watching you two causes me nothing but unease. I’d like to push you into at least one kind of relationship I can understand so that I can feel better about it.”

“Would Toriko and I going out make you feel better, Kozakura-san?”

“It would.”

“Why...?” I didn’t get it at all.

“I’ll be able to say, ‘Ohh, I can treat those two like a *couple*.’ I can let Sorawo-chan look after Toriko, and vice versa. I don’t need to think about *anything* anymore. ‘You two look after yourselves now...’ Basically, I’d be able to cut you both out of my thoughts, and that would make my life easier.”

“Hrmm...”

I saw where she was coming from, but it still didn’t sit right with me. Kozakura was nice, so maybe she had a hard time worrying about others so much more than I did.

“It’s not like you’re going to stop going to the Otherside just because you start dating. Why don’t you go have a picnic there once Toriko’s wish comes true and you’re a couple?” Kozakura said, then suddenly got angry and added, “That was a joke, okay? Do *not* go there like you’re going to have a picnic.”

“Could you please not just flip out at me out of nowhere?”

“When it comes to you two, I’m always flipping out.”

“Oh... That reminds me. I talked to a person called Tsuji-san at DS Research.”

Kozakura openly scowled when I mentioned that name. “Tsuji? She’s *still* working there? I hadn’t seen her in awhile, so I figured she’d kicked the bucket.”

“She talked as if the two of you were close. Are the two of you friends by any—”

“No way. I can’t stand her,” Kozakura answered with total antipathy, then looked at me again with concern. “She didn’t do anything to you, did she, Sorawo-chan?”

“You could say that she did, yeah.”

“What?!”

“She picked a fight with me using the evil eye.”

“Huh? What’s that?”

When I explained what had happened, Kozakura let out an exasperated sigh. “Sounds like she’s as creepy as ever.”

“She mentioned she collects cursed items. I guess that’s a thing some people do, huh?”

“She’s creepy *and* she has awful taste. And because she’s a swindler, she’s quick to seize control of the conversation whenever

you talk to her.”

“Oh! Yeah, she did do that. She called herself a magician. Was that a cult thing, like I thought?”

“No, it’s not a cult thing. I’ve never seen her make a business of it, at least,” Kozakura said, then, in a dubious tone of voice, asked, “So, what’d you talk about with her?”

“She was saying that Toriko and I are on the front line for first contact.”

“With the Otherside?”

“Yes.”

Kozakura leaned back in her chair. “She’s not wrong about that. There isn’t another person out there who’s been able to get so deeply involved with the Otherside, and on a continuous basis too, at that. You’re awfully hardy.”

“Hardy?”

“You don’t die when they mess around with you a little, right? That’s why they keep on targeting you, isn’t it?”

“That’s how it’s worked out, but... I don’t know how I feel about it being because we’re hardy.”

“If you think about it, the idea that stamina is the quality that’s most necessary for first contact might be surprisingly accurate. I didn’t have that kind of stamina.”

I didn’t like the self-derisive tone I heard in that last sentence, so I tried to change the subject. “You may lack stamina, Kozakura-san, but you’ve got, I dunno...a sense of responsibility, don’t you?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, you did choose to take in Kasumi...”

Kozakura let out a long sigh when I said that. “Seriously, I’m such an upstanding individual, aren’t I? I never would’ve thought I had it in me to do that.”

“Kasumi’s in the house now, right?”

“Sure is. Probably.”

“Probably?”

“She comes and goes a lot, but she seems to have a basic understanding that she’s been told to live here.”

“When I got here today, I was thinking things haven’t changed much even though she’s supposed to be here. I thought it would be messier.”

“Take a look at the kitchen and you’ll see. Or the kid’s bedroom, if you can call it that. I was going to give her one of the unused upstairs rooms, but when I went to clean it, she’d used a blanket to set up something like a tent in a gap between the furniture to sleep in, so I’ve left it alone for now.”

“She did the same thing in the boundary region at DS Research.

Awfully self-sufficient for a child, huh?”

“If I could get past the way she’s so quick to make off with my stuff, she’d be surprisingly easy to look after. I don’t know if that’s good or bad. She needs to learn to speak before I can send her to school, so I’ve been teaching her that.”

“Is she able to talk a little now?” I inquired only to hear a voice from behind me.

“Have you been painting the town yellow again, Jack?”

“Huh?!”

I turned around, surprised. Kasumi was standing behind the sofa, looking down at me. I hadn’t sensed her until just before she spoke, so she’d likely shifted here from somewhere else again. Continuing on in a flat tone, as if she were reading something, she said, “Jack the Pisser was the mysterious serial urinator who terrorized nineteenth century England. He urinated all over Whitechapel, leaving cryptic messages on the walls with his piss, forcing the chief investigator, Thomas Arnold, to wash it off.”

What’s she even talking about?

“Say hello, Kasumi.”

“Hi there.”

Her tone was suddenly playful, but her expression was unchanged. I’d heard this one just recently, so I could kind of recognize it. She was probably reusing Tsuji’s greeting.

“Uh, yeah. Hi there...”

I returned the greeting, then turned to Kozakura. “Jack the Pisser? Where’d she get *that* from?”

“Word salad, probably. She might be grabbing stuff at random from kids’ textbooks, books lying around the house, YouTube, and whatever else comes to hand.”

“Gogh’s known as a dual-use land and sea artist. The other artists of the same type are the Zugogh, Zogogh, High Gogh, and Prototype Gogh.”

Is she talking to me...? I don’t get it at all.

As I sat there confused, Kozakura looked at Kasumi, getting deeply emotional. “This must be how she gradually picks up words. She’s still developing, so it’s just random nonsense, though.”

“Yeah... I’ll bet it is.”

“I know I told you not to use words that would be bad for her education before, but this is making me feel responsible for that too. Did I ever tell you about how I used to ghostwrite for self-help books?”

“Right.”

“No matter what you write, they sell based on the name value of the person on the cover, so it started feeling sillier and sillier to me. I

started thinking, 'This person's fans will probably believe any pack of lies I write,' so I wrote, 'All the really good businessmen have had themselves castrated,' and made up some reasoning that sounded good for it."

"Right... Wait, what?"

"And you know what happened? There were a number of people online writing, 'I got castrated too!' Whew, that really got me. There was even a hashtag going around for it. I quit the job because I was too spooked after that, but, yeah, words sure can be scary things, huh?"

As I sat there, floored by this sudden and bizarre revelation about her past, Kozakura gave me a dazed smile.

"Maybe you remember this, Sorawo-chan. There was that show a long time ago, 'Let's Go to the Savanna!' You know how there was a segment, 'Opinions of a Civilized Person,' right?"

"Was that a thing...?"

"They took venture capitalists, consultants, politicians, and other people who thought they were a big deal in the city to the savanna, then watched to see if they could act the same way there. It got some real good laughs out of me at the time. Of course, most of those vapid people got eaten alive."

I couldn't *not* notice at this point. There was no way any such program ever existed.

"It was originally a show in South Africa. They just ripped off the idea. But there was a joke on Omocoro recently about how one of them kept up with his spiel even as the vultures picked at his innards, so the show really did leave its mark, huh?"

"Kozakura-san!"

Without stopping to think about it, I rose from the sofa and started slapping Kozakura's face lightly with both of my hands.

"Wha... What the... Stop it."

After blinking her unfocused eyes several times, she went back to normal. She brushed my hands away, so I backed off. "You were going crazy just now, Kozakura-san."

"Huh? How so?"

"Did you used to write self-help books?"

"What are you talking about, out of nowhere?"

The word salad Kasumi produced as part of her learning process must have had an effect on Kozakura...or something like that. The way their words had been internally consistent despite being nonsense reminded me of the interstitial space. If the interfaces of the Otherside could assume many forms, then maybe the interstitial spaces were the same way.

Kasumi came over beside me, looking up at me and Kozakura in

turn.

“Is this going to be okay?” I asked her.

“We’ll manage somehow. There’s two of us.”

I couldn’t remember immediately. Were those my words? Or Toriko’s? The quote did fit the flow of this conversation, but who were the two people in this case? Me and Kasumi? Kozakura and Kasumi? Kozakura and me...?

At the very least, Kasumi didn’t seem shaken up. Her facial expression told me this was no big deal. In that case, well, maybe it was fine, but...it had surprised me so much that I’d lost track of whatever we were discussing beforehand.

We kept on talking for a little while after that (with occasional interruptions by Kasumi’s strange word salad), but Kozakura’s opinion about my worries didn’t change all that much. Basically, her answer was an offhanded “you have nothing to lose, so just give up and go out with her.” Maybe she was so busy looking after Kasumi that she couldn’t be bothered to deal with me. I found that mildly unamusing, but understandable.

As I was standing in the entranceway, about to leave, she mumbled, “If only you’d had the same sort of interest in Toriko as you do in the Otherside.”

“Huh...?”

“An interest in the other party, a preparedness to step into their domain without fear, and the stamina to stay involved with them. It’s the same with people too.”

I stared at her blankly.

“Sorawo-chan, are you engaging in first contact with Toriko properly?”

3

I was lost in thought on my way home. I nearly missed my stop on the train.

The bus had just arrived as I was disembarking from the Saikyo Line at Minami-Yono Station, so I got aboard. It was a lucky thing too, because it was starting to rain. I sat in an empty seat towards the front, gazing out the window. Headlights drifted past on a street the sun had set on.

It wasn’t that I couldn’t understand everything Natsumi and Kozakura had said to me.

An undefined relationship made people uneasy, so they wanted things put in some concrete form. That was probably what Toriko was hoping for me to do. Toriko needed a relationship she could put an easy to understand name on, like saying we were dating, or we were

lovers.

But that was exactly what I was so caught up on.

“I think it already has a form, though...”

Can't we be “accomplices”?

That was the relationship Toriko presented me with the day we went Kunekune hunting. Maybe she didn't understand just how important that word, which represented the two of us, was to me.

“Did you know? They say that being accomplices is the closest kind of relationship in the world.”

I hadn't understood it myself at first. The vague word “accomplices” had taken on a clearer and clearer outline as we explored the other world, and became irreplaceable to me before I knew it.

Two people who share a secret no one else knows. A pair who can go anywhere, trusting the other with their life and sanity. That's the kind of relationship we were supposed to have.

Dating, being lovers, getting married, all of that stuff paled in comparison to us being “accomplices” as far as I was concerned. We already had “the closest relationship in the world,” after all.

I'd been offered the most powerful bond possible from the very beginning, and accepted it. So, being offered a downgrade after all this time did nothing for me at all.

Couldn't Toriko live with this form—the one we'd had all this time?

Yeah... Probably not. Considering she'd gone to all this trouble asking me to clarify things.

What a pain...

My head felt heavy, thinking about all these things I usually didn't. I rested my head against the window of the bus. The cool glass felt nice against the overheated skin of my head. Sparkling in the reflection of the street lights, trails of rain flowed across my field of vision.

I'm almost home. I'm just gonna eat, then go to bed...

Closing my eyes, I noticed there was some other sound intermingled with those of the bus. There was a whistling coming from somewhere; the sound of the wind.

The sound of a draft.

With a start, I was roused from my pondering thoughts.

It's just like that time. The sound I heard from the mujina on the way back from DS Research!

I turned to look over my shoulder. Under the ceiling lights, I saw other passengers scattered around the bus. My eyes were instantly drawn to one of them.

That messy blonde hair undoubtedly belonged to Toriko. Yet, for

some reason, she was wearing Japanese clothes. She was sitting alone in the rear of the vehicle, her back turned to me.

Things were already blatantly weird at that point. She couldn't sit with her back to me on a bus seat. There wasn't the remotest chance it was Toriko—it was the mujina.

The other passengers hadn't noticed anything was off. Either that, or only I could see her. I could only twist myself around in my seat, staring at the mujina.

Focusing on my right eye, there was a faint silver phosphorescence coming from the kimono-wearing figure with her back turned to me. At that same time, I grimaced at the foul stench that was hanging in the air. A sharp smell, like that of a wet animal.

The other passengers weren't reacting to this either. I don't know how it worked, but it seemed that I was experiencing this smell along with the vision of my right eye.

I can't draw my gun here. I'll get off at the next stop for now, and then... I was thinking as there was an announcement over the bus's intercom.

"Next stop, Sakawa-kitamachi. Sakawa-kitamachi."

I immediately pressed the request stop button. A buzzer sounded, and the "Stopping" lamp lit up. I got up from my seat as the bus slowed to a stop. The driver side door opened. I cautiously backed towards it, never taking my eyes off the mujina.

"Are you all right?" the driver asked hesitantly, noticing my clearly strange behavior.

"Oh, I'm fine. Sorry to worry you," I replied reflexively, never taking my eyes off the mujina. That must have been suspicious, because the driver leaned out beside me to look at the back of the bus for herself.

"Was there something there?" the driver asked, probably unable to see a thing. In the hopes of preventing any further confusion, I quickly moved to disembark.

"No, nothing... Please, don't worry about it."

"Okay then. Watch your step."

"Oh, right. Thank you for—"

Stepping off the bus backwards, as the seats obscured the mujina from my vision, I finally looked towards the driver.

The face beneath the bus driver's hat...was Toriko's. Only it was upside down—jaw up top, forehead at the bottom. The inverted face stared at me with no expression whatsoever. Its mouth hung open, repeating the same line.

"Watch your step."

Whoosh, I took leave of my senses.

The rumble of an engine and the smell of exhaust brought me

back to reality.

Blinking, I saw the red glare of rear lights on the night road, the back of the bus as it drove off into the distance.

I crouched down alone, as if clinging to the bus stop. The rain fell quietly. My clothes were barely wet, so I had probably only been out of it for a moment.

I looked around as I tried to recover from the shock, only to be hit by an even bigger one.

This wasn't my usual bus stop. There was a guard rail on the right hand side, and a steep, concrete retaining wall on the left. It was a road somewhere in the mountains. The bus turned the corner, leaving me astonished. Soon the sounds of the engine, and the glare of the lights, vanished as though they had never been there in the first place.

Where am I now...? I pulled out my smartphone, meaning to check a map.

"Urgh..." I let out an involuntary groan. There were indecipherable symbols dancing across my screen.

That meant this was the other world. And at night, when it was more dangerous.

The sky was covered in rain clouds, blotting out the light of the stars. It was almost pitch black aside from the light leaking from my phone's screen.

This is the other world...but where? Is anywhere I know nearby?

I squinted at the bus station, looking for any clue. It hit me immediately.

I know this place, I thought with a sense of relief. *I came here with Toriko. We stopped here to eat on the day we found the Mayoiga.*

That means the Mayoiga is above here. Todate and Hana should be there.

I'm saved...

I thought it was over. I couldn't immediately think of a way to get back without Toriko to open a gate, but at least I had somewhere to take refuge for now.

I pulled my Makarov and flashlight out of my bag. After checking the ammunition and the safety, I strapped the holster to my thigh and fixed it in place with velcro. I spread out a waterproof bag, putting my bag with the rest of its contents inside of it. I always carried the bare minimum equipment I'd need for exploring just in case this sort of situation suddenly arose.

As I turned on the flashlight, a mossy set of stone steps appeared in the circle it illuminated. I started climbing them before anything else weird could attack me.

I used my hands as I climbed the rain-slick steps in darkness. Once I had managed to make my way up to the top of the retaining wall

without slipping and falling, I walked across a footpath in the undergrowth and immediately came to a brick wall with a small, straight path along the outside of it. The phosphorescent tape I had left as a marker previously shone yellow in the light of my flashlight.

The Mayoiga was on the other side of the wall, but I'd need to go all the way around it to get inside. I began following the wall. I walked quickly at first, but soon broke into a run. The leaves of the trees surrounding the mansion kept rustling as they were pelted with rain, and I got more and more scared with each noise I heard.

The path bent to the left, and then left once again, following the wall. A large, cast-iron gate door stood open, facing onto an empty lot that was paved with gravel. I knew that strangely frightening hill ought to be on the opposite side of the empty lot, but I sure didn't feel like going out of my way to look at it in this situation.

Rushing through the gate, I saw the mansion, its design a compromise between Western and Eastern influences, through the silhouettes of the garden trees planted in the front yard. I could see that the entranceway faintly lit up on the other side of the old sliding door.

Though that was a relief, I didn't head in that direction, instead following the inside of the wall towards the right-hand side. As I walked across the large gravel, I came to a circular driveway that was paved. This was the other entrance to the Mayoiga. Last time we came, I got the sense that Todate and Hana mostly lived on this side of the house.

Crossing the circular driveway, I arrived in front of the Western-style entrance. I pounded the knocker and then pushed open the door without waiting for a response. It opened easily because it wasn't locked. A soft light leaked out from the doorway.

"Excuse me! Hello!"

My voice echoed against the high ceiling of the entrance hall.

"Todate-san, are you in? It's Kamikoshi, the one who visited before!"

There was no response.

I entered the hall, and closed the door. It suddenly became very quiet as the sound of rain was blocked out.

"I'm coming in..."

I walked towards another door on my left. My wet shoes left their mark on the sparkling marble floor and the spotless dark red rug. A wide, open room with a fireplace was on the other side of the open door. The room had a number of round tables with chairs around them, like a café. Last time we came, we had mugwort mochi here.

There was a log quietly burning in the fireplace. I pulled up a chair and sat down next to the fire, its warmth spreading through my

cold body. That long dog, Hana, had been lying here before, but it was just me now.

I'd settled down a bit, having fled into a safe place. There was no sound coming from anywhere in the mansion. Were they out...? On this rainy night?

I stood up, meaning to take a look around. It was a big place, and it was raining outside, so maybe they hadn't noticed my arrival.

This was technically their home, so I felt bad wandering around without permission, but we were both armed, so acting all sneaky could actually prove more dangerous. I let my footsteps be heard, occasionally calling the owner's name as I headed deeper into the house.

"Todate-san, are you there? I'm coming in."

"Hana. Hanaaaa. Aren't you there?"

"Isn't...anyone there?"

I wandered around who knows how many rooms I'd been to before, as well as places I hadn't. I looked around for about an hour before returning from the second floor to the hall I'd started in.

No one was around.

This went beyond them just being out; there was no trace of anyone living here at all. No trash lying around, everything polished until it sparkled. Even the sinks were all clean and dry. With such a big dog, you'd expect to see a bowl for food, or a bed for her to sleep in, but I didn't find those either. Even if the Mayoiga had a self-cleaning feature, if it cleaned up after people in the brief time they were out of the house, then Todate wouldn't have been able to live here like she had been.

Did that mean Todate and Hana hadn't lived here in a while?

Or maybe...they never did at all?

No, no, that couldn't be right. We ate the deer meat that we took back as a souvenir that time, and it was just as delicious as it should have been.

Did something happen to the two of them? They were experienced hunters, but anything could happen when they were walking around the Otherside. Much as I didn't want to imagine it, the odds weren't all that low.

I'm tired...

Whatever the case, there was nothing I could do about it now. It was night in the Otherside, and Todate and Hana weren't around, and it was raining outside. If I was going to do anything, it would have to wait until morning.

I climbed the stairs again, returning to the second floor. I came all this way, so I was going to wash myself off here at least.

I was able to use the shower in the bathroom, and the stylish tub

was already full of hot water. There was body soap, shampoo, and conditioner, all with brand names I couldn't read. I decided to just go with it and try using them. The fragrance wasn't one I had smelled all that often.

Staring up at the ceiling as I soaked in the tub, I thought, *If this were one of those old fairy tales, I'd find out a tanuki tricked me into bathing in a dung heap, with a bit of a laugh. As far as monsters go, the mujina is like a relative of the tanuki, so it might be possible. When I was looking around earlier, I saw there was food laid out in the kitchen. Maybe that was all horse dung too?*

I got out of the bath, wiped myself down with a fluffy towel, and then headed to the bedroom. Not that I was trying to be wary of dung, but I pulled one of the Calorie Mate bars that I carried for emergencies out of my bag and had a simple meal consisting of that and some instant coffee.

I washed my mouth out at the sink, then crawled into bed. I'd put my clothes back on so I was ready if anything happened, but it was still far more comfy than the worn-out futon I had at home.

Living in a place like this...yeah, of course Todate wouldn't want to go home anymore...

I was so exhausted I would have thought I could doze off immediately, but now that I was actually in the bed I couldn't get to sleep. It felt awfully big. Sure, it was a large bed. No doubt about that. But that wasn't it.

Oh, I realized. It's because Toriko's not here.

Whenever I've spent the night in the Otherside before, Toriko was always here with me. Now she isn't. There's no Toriko anywhere in this big bed, in the Mayoiga, or anywhere in the Otherside.

It felt so very unnatural to me.

There was a tightening sensation in my chest.

"It feels so lonely..."

The words slipped out of my mouth. Once I'd spoken them, I couldn't help but be aware of it.

I'm lonely.

I feel so forlorn without Toriko... I really hate it.

Where did the me of so long ago, the one who wanted to have the vastness of the Otherside all to herself, go?

Curling up into a ball in the bed that was too big for one person, I fled into the land of sleep.



How long had passed? I woke up when I noticed a sudden sound. I sat up in bed, listening closely. The bedside lamp, which I had left on, filled the room with a soft light.

It's outside... No doubt about it. I hear something outside.

I got out of bed. I approached the window after putting on my shoes and grabbing my stuff so I was ready to move at any moment. When I pulled back the curtain, I had a perfect view down onto the circular driveway in front of the entrance. Opening the window, I was able to hear a distinct noise in the quiet of night in the Otherside. A car. The sound of a high exhaust engine, like Migiwa's Benz. And wheels rolling over gravel. It was approaching from outside the premises.

For some reason, I recognized the sound. But from where...?

The dream.

There was a dream that I'd seen many times after we returned from the Mayoiga to the surface world. Something frightening climbing up the dark hill in front of the Mayoiga. It had assumed a different form in each dream. One of which was a large, black car. This was definitely the sound of tires on gravel, climbing the hill, that I had heard in that dream.

I looked on, unable to do anything, as the headlights came into view. Passing through the gate, the black car entered the grounds. I couldn't tell in the dark of night, but even in the dream the inside of the car had been obscured with smoked glass.

The car drove around the circular driveway, stopping at the entrance.

Who was riding inside? I could feel the answer to that question gradually bubbling up inside of me.

Surely, it was the true master of the Mayoiga. The one that the mansion's guests must never meet, the thing whose face they must not see.

I instinctively looked away at the sound of the door opening.

I need to get out of here, pronto, before—

I turned on my heel, then froze where I stood.

There was *something* on top of the bed that I'd been sleeping in not that long ago.

A human-sized lump, squirming around under the covers.

"Who's there...?" I called out. The movement stopped.

Then, as if stretching, it started to move again. The covers fell back, revealing what was beneath them.

It was a naked Toriko. Kneeling in bed, with her hair hiding her downturned face. She gradually raised her head, revealing her face.

That face was...intense.

It was like the parts of Toriko's face had all been scattered around, their numbers and positions randomized. Its multiple mouths opened, calling my name with Toriko's voice.

"Sorawo."

"Sorawo!"

"Hey, Sorawo."

"I love you, Sorawo."

I couldn't take it anymore. I screamed and—

4

"I was really scared."

"Mm-hm, I'm sure you were."

"I'd never seen her face like that."

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm."

"But it was Toriko's face. It was all messed up, but I could still recognize it, and that was scary."

"It's okay. You don't have to worry anymore."

Laying there on my back, getting my head patted, I gradually calmed down. The voice that soothed my frayed nerves had a lovely ring to it, and as I listened with my eyes closed it felt as though it were sucking me in.

"I'm glad you came, Kamikoshi-san."

"Why is that?"

"Because I'd never have expected you to rely on me like this."

"Rely on you..."

Rely on...who?

I opened my eyes and looked up to see a smiling face with big scars on its cheeks.

"Huh?! Runa?!"

"That's me, yes?"

Runa Urumi watched with a smile as I hastily sat up.

"Why... Huh?! What're you doing here???"

"What am *I* doing here? Didn't *you* come to see *me*, Kamikoshi-san?"

"I what...?"

Looking around, all of the walls and the ceiling were white. This was Runa's cell all right. Based on our current positions, it looked like I had been laying in bed, resting my head in Runa's lap.

What made me do that...? I was just confused.

"I was surprised when you just suddenly showed up out of nowhere. It's happened before, though. What's up with that, Kamikoshi-san? Do you always pass through my room on your way back from the blue world?"

“No, no, no, no... No way.”

“Well, that’s sure how it seems. You got startled and left in a real hurry last time, but this time you hung around, so I got all happy, thinking you’d finally come to trust me a little.”

I couldn’t tell if that smile, accentuated by her scars, was just an ordinary grin, or if she was trying to insinuate something.

“How long have I been here? I can’t remember all that well.”

“An hour or so, I guess? You came tumbling out of midair just as I was going to sleep, and I screamed.”

The wall clock said it was three o’clock. In the middle of the night.

“You were super scared, and shaking, so I stroked you and kept on saying, ‘It’s okay, it’s okay,’ until you settled down. You had something scary happen to you over there, didn’t you? Involving Nishina-san.”

“What did I say...?”

“That Nishina-san’s face was scary, that she had no face, that she had a bunch of mouths; it was a whole lot of nonsense, really. Are the two of you not getting along recently?”

I got off the bed, unable to say anything. My shoes were neatly laid out at my feet. Had she taken them off for me? They were wet to the touch and dirty with mud and bits of grass. The waterproof nylon bag I had put my stuff in was sitting next to the bed. I don’t know how I escaped from the Mayoiga, but it’s impressive that I hadn’t abandoned this bag in the process.

“Hey, listen.”

“Yes?”

“Could you, um...keep what happened here a secret, maybe?”

“Why? Would it be bad for you if someone found out?”

“Uh...” As I came up short for words, Runa grinned. This time, I *could* tell: she was insinuating something.

“I get how it is. I won’t tell Nishina-san.”

Maybe I’d said more than I should have. “I’m gonna head home now. Sorry to barge in on you late at night like this.”

“Wha? It’s too late for that. The trains have all stopped by now, right? Why not stay over with me?”

“No, I’m good, I’m good.”

“Oh, don’t be a stranger. We could chit-chat the night away, you know?”

Shaking off Runa as she tried to keep me from going, I left the room.

Even at DS Research, where the lines between day and night were more vague, there was still no one around at this hour. My footsteps were the sole sounds echoing in the silence of the corridor.

I took the elevator down and headed outside. It was still raining. This business district was completely deserted at 3 a.m. and there was no place to kill time while I waited for morning. I walked one station to Akasaka-Mitsuke, staying alert for any mujinas that might be hunched over under the streetlights, then headed into an internet café to sleep.

By the time I woke up again, it was past the time when the first train would have departed.

I left the café, then boarded the subway, transferred to another train just before rush hour, and made it back home to Minami-Yono Station.

From there I took a bus—one that dropped me off at the stop closest to home like it was supposed to this time.

Dragging my exhausted body back to the apartment, I turned the key, opened the door, and...

“What?!”

Toriko was standing in the kitchen. I could see the side of her face; it was a proper, ordinary face.

She stood in front of the gas stove, heating up something in a frying pan. A savory smell hung in the room.

“Wh-What’re you doing here?”

Did she come because she was worried? And then started making breakfast...?

I hurriedly took my shoes off and entered the room. “You came? Why—”

Toriko looked down at the frying pan, unresponsive. She seemed mad, so I panicked.

An inexplicable guilt welled up inside me. I *had* just finished letting Runa Urumi, of all people, pat me while I rested my head in her lap, after all. It wasn’t something I’d wanted, and I hadn’t been happy about the situation, but I couldn’t wipe away the sense I’d done something wrong.

“Hey, Toriko. Say something, will you?”

As I approached, I sensed something was amiss: there was nothing in the frying pan on the stove. Also, I didn’t own a proper cast-iron pan like that. Mine was lighter, with a Teflon coating.

Just as I noticed, Toriko turned towards me, gripping the frying pan by the handle.

“Have you learned your lesson?!” she shouted as she bashed me in the head. My legs bucked with the impact, and down I went.

As I stared up vacantly, I saw Toriko—no, the thing wearing her shape—turn on her heel and walk out of my room. The profile of her face that I had thought looked normal was actually flat, like it was printed on, and if I’d seen it from another angle I’d have realized it

instantly.

“Hey, it’s cheating for a mujina to have a face!!!” I vented my impotent rage as I crawled across the floor.

Ugh, I am so sick of this. I can’t take it anymore. It’s an issue with Toriko too. Being so easy for a monster to imitate.

I rose shakily to my feet, having totally lost it.

I was wrong to ever obey the one week time limit she gave me. I should’ve known that too. Never let the other person seize the initiative. That goes for the Otherside, and for Toriko.

If that’s how you’re gonna be—I’m coming to get you myself!!!

File 26: Accomplices No More

1

Normally, being struck with a hot iron frying pan would leave a mark, but when I hesitantly touched the spot, I didn't have a bump there. My hair was fine too. Was it a hallucination? Or was the entire series of events that led to me being hit by a mujina that had Toriko's face all one "phenomenon"? I don't even know if there's a distinction between the two, but...it was probably the latter.

There's a rather minor ghost story that includes the same sequence of events I had experienced. The title it was given on the accumulation site was "The Girlfriend I Met on Mixi."

One morning, without warning, the experiencer gets smacked with a frying pan by the girl he's been dating. She shouts, "Have you learned your lesson?" Then walks off, leaving the experiencer in a state of confusion.

Taken on its own, this would just be an incident of violence. It's what came after that made this a ghost story.

The experiencer tries to contact his girlfriend in an attempt to figure out why she'd suddenly assaulted him. However, he finds her phone has been disconnected, and her workplace tells him, "No such person ever existed." The apartment where she lived is an empty shell too. There's no one at her family home, and even the name plate has been removed.

Using her father's business card, which he received when he'd visited her family at home once before, he goes to the office where the man supposedly works, but once again there is no such person. He's even told the business card is a fake. He visits the high school where she said her little brother was active on the baseball team, but the uniforms there, and the baseball team's uniform, are both different from the ones the brother wore.

He remains unsure of what she meant by "Have you learned your lesson?" and has no idea what motive her entire family had for tricking him, but people beyond just the experiencer have also met her, so she wasn't just a hallucination or delusion. Unable to figure out what in the world's happened, he's creeped out and afraid... That's the kind of experiential report it is. It's more or less certain that the situation I had experienced was following the outline of this story.

Having thought it through this far, there was one inevitable

conclusion:

What if this ghost story continued along the same track?

Wouldn't Toriko vanish, and it would be like she never existed in the first place?!

Clutching my still throbbing head, I rushed out of the apartment, driven by that sense of urgency. (And not just because I'd snapped.)

We won't see each other for a week, and she won't contact me either—that's what Toriko said, but what do I care? I'm going to show up at her house. First thing's first, I need to check that she's safe.

Taking the bus down the same road I'd come, I took the Saikyo Line back in the Ikebukuro direction. It was morning commute time at this point, so the train was packed. I endured that for thirty minutes, crushed by the congestion and my own sense of urgency, and when the train finally spat me out at Ikebukuro I was all worn-out.

The rain that had been falling when I left home had gotten stronger in the last half hour. Raindrops bouncing off the roof of the stopped train drenched the platform, and the air was heavy with rainy season humidity.

With no time to rest, I transferred to the equally crowded Yamanote Line. I'd called and texted Toriko multiple times at this point, but she didn't respond.

My uncertainty mounted. *Could she really have...?*

The last time I tried to go to Toriko's place, the Time-space Man got in my way. It was a pain in the butt that time too, but I knew that Toriko had gone to the Otherside searching for Satsuki Uruma by herself, so I was able to go after her. Even if I was a bit cowardly about it.

But if Toriko vanished without going anywhere in particular, I had no idea what I was supposed to do. I could search whatever places came to mind, but there were a limited number of those. Just the university in the surface world. Maybe Canada was a possibility, but I'd have absolutely no idea how to go about searching for her in that case. That only left the other world.

If it came to that, then I'd be in the same position as Toriko when she was searching for Satsuki Uruma.

Everyone would give up on her, and as she faded from memory, I alone would believe in her survival, frequently going to the Otherside. Then, like Abarato, I'd gradually go insane.

It could've happened to Toriko, and it could still happen to me.

At the same time as I was shuddering at this all too possible future, I was also shocked by something else.

I know way too little about Toriko. Where she might go. What she's been through. Who she knows. Where in Canada she lived, and what her life was like there. Or even what kind of kid she was.

Any information I can recall is minor, and fragmentary.

What have I been looking at all this time? We've been together for a whole year.

No, I guess we've only been together for a year.

I thought we were close...thought I knew her well...thought we had an emotional connection, but was that all an illusion? Was it just an assumption on my part?

"How do you feel about me, Sorawo?"

That question, which had me so indignant over how trite it was... All of a sudden, it was starting to feel incredibly significant.

I'd thought, *Why's she asking that?* But when you consider the fact that I know next to nothing about Toriko, the meaning of the question changes.

Maybe the issue wasn't whether I loved her or not, but a problem that came long before that.

Was I even interested in Toriko to begin with?

"Sorawo-chan, are you engaging in first contact with Toriko properly?"

When two different cultures come into contact, if you measure the other by your own standards, that's cultural understanding.

This was the most basic of basics in cultural anthropology, something which had been drilled into us since the very first lecture.

Maybe...I hadn't been making first contact.

The train arrived in Nippori. Pushed by the rush of people, I got off, went down the stairs, and out the gate.

I climbed the hill, out of breath, in the unrelenting rain. The wall of a graveyard continued along the left-hand side. Turning onto a side street at the top of the hill, I could see Toriko's apartment building in the middle of a residential area.

Walking quickly in that direction, I tried calling again... No luck. She wasn't answering. I was still feeling anxious as I arrived at the building.

The building uses an auto-lock system, so I'll need to punch her room number into the panel in the entrance hall to call her—but what if she doesn't answer? I was thinking as I reached the entrance, but one of the residents was just coming out. Nice timing. I quickly walked past them through the automatic door. They glanced in my direction, scaring me for a second, but apparently they didn't have time to stop and call me out on it.

I got in the elevator and pressed the button for the fourth floor. There was nothing posted about cleaning the water tank.

Getting off on the fourth floor, I headed into the hallway. The town I could see over the chest-high wall was misty in the rain. The announcements coming from the direction of the station and the

sounds of the trains were vague and muffled.

At the end of the hall was Room 404. Toriko's place.

Coming to a stop in front of her door, I peered through the peephole. The last time I came, the room had been filled with the blue of the Otherside. How about now? I couldn't imagine what was on the other side of the door.

Toriko, you're in there, right...? Please, be there, I prayed as I reached out—and rang the doorbell.

No response.

It's Thursday. Toriko doesn't have class today, so she should be home in the morning unless she has other plans.

I tried again, pressing the button longer this time. Just as it occurred to me to call her phone and test to see if I could hear it ring inside, a voice came from the speaker.

"Hello."

It was a low, disgruntled voice, but unmistakably Toriko's.

"Toriko! It's me!" I said, snapping at the chance.

"Huh? Sorawo?" The voice on the other side of the intercom rose with sudden surprise.

"Yes!"

"Wha? Huh? Why? No way. Huh? It hasn't been a week yet, you know that?"

"You never said I couldn't come."

"Well, no. I didn't, but... Why?"

"Because I haven't heard from you and I got worried."

"I told you I wouldn't contact you..."

Her confused voice took on a suspicious tone.

"Is this really Sorawo?"

"Sure is. You can come see for yourself, can't you?"

"If you're phony, I'm shooting you, okay?"

"Yikes. This is a residential area, okay?"

I heard the slight shuffling of feet on the other side of the door, getting closer. Brushing back my rain-mussed hair lightly, I looked back at Toriko who was probably on the other side of the peephole. There was a gap of several seconds, then the sound of the lock, and the door handle began to turn.

Toriko's face emerged, a look of surprise and confusion plastered to it. "It really is Sorawo..."

"In the flesh. Not that I blame you for doubting me."

Toriko looked me up and down, her eyes seeming to lick me all over. Then she looked back up again. "You're sopping wet. What happened?"

"It rained," I answered. Toriko poked her head out a bit, looking outside.

"I didn't realize it was coming down so hard."

"Did you just get up?"

"Yeah..."

"Sorry for waking you. I tried calling."

"I have you set to blocked."

"Why?"

"Because I'd answer otherwise... I told you I wasn't going to contact you, so I felt like I had to stick to that."

As she rubbed her still sleepy face, Toriko was being more vague than usual.

"Were you worried about me? Sorry to make you come all this way. I'm fine."

"Well, there's more to it than that..." I said, albeit hesitantly. "You asked me how I feel about you, right?"

"Huh...? Yeah."

"I thought I'd give you my response."

Toriko's eyes shot open. It looked like that woke her up real fast.

"Huh? Wh-Why?"

"What do you mean, why...? You asked, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah, but... Huh? But it hasn't been a week yet..."

"There should be no harm if I want to answer you a little early, right?"

"Well, yeah, but hold on... Just give me a second. I'm not ready for this," Toriko said with still just her head sticking out of the door.

"What's with the half-hearted posture?"

"Well, y'know, I've been holding this thing the whole time."

I heard her lay down something heavy. I wanted to poke fun at her, saying, "*You seriously answered the door with a gun in your hands?*" But I'd probably have done the same.

I was satisfied with that answer, but Toriko made no move to open the door. She just left her head poking out of the gap, and she seemed to be fidgeting. Getting more and more suspicious, I asked, "What? Would it be bad if I came in? Are you not wearing clothes or something?"

"I'm dressed! There's no way I'd come to the door in the nude."

"Well, you're not opening the door for me, are you?"

Honestly, with Toriko, I wouldn't have ruled out the possibility. She was sleeping in her birthday suit at the hotel in Okinawa, after all.

"You *are* Toriko, right? And you exist from the neck down too? You're not just some disembodied head?"

"Where'd that horrifying idea come from?"

"Hey, I have every right to be scared. I'm feeling pretty uneasy after multiple attacks by something from the Otherside that was trying to look like you."

“Huh?! Were you okay?”

“I’m fine, but I won’t feel right until you let me see you.”

“Whaa... Oh, fine.”

Reluctantly, Toriko opened the door wide. Though she lacked her usual pizzazz in her current getup of sandals, a tank top, and short shorts, she was definitely Toriko. I let out an involuntary sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness you’re okay. Nothing strange happened on your end?”

“Uh, probably not.”

“It was just me, then, huh? Okay, so back to what I was saying... Achoo!” I sneezed in the middle of what I was saying. “Sorry, could you let me in? I’m all cold from the rain.”

“Let you into my place?!”

“Y-Yeah...?”

I was confused. This seemed to shake her up more than I’d expected.

“What? Is it a problem?” I asked.

“No... Not exactly.”

“Is someone visiting, maybe?”

“No, nobody’s here.”

I looked at Toriko’s feet. The entrance hall was full of footwear—stylish sandals, colorful sneakers, trekking shoes caked with dried mud, and thick-heeled long boots. I recognized many of them, but there were others I’d never seen her wear before. It wouldn’t have been that odd if one of those pairs belonged to someone else.

“So, uh, did I come at a bad time, after all?”

“Huh?! Not at all... No, that’s not true at all.”

“Well, why aren’t you letting me in, then?”

“Why do you want to be let in?”

I hadn’t expected to be asked that. I was speechless. Maybe Toriko had just blurted that out, because she tried to soften it by saying, “Um, y’know, my room’s, uh, not really the kind of place you let people into.”

“Huh... Is it a hoarder house?”

“No! It’s just... Augh, what do I do...?” Toriko covered her face with both hands as I looked on, bewildered.

“Okay, listen,” she finally said.

“Mm-hm.”

“I’m glad you came. And that you worried about me. And that you ran all the way here in the rain. And that you want to answer my question. Really glad.” Toriko’s eyes wandered as she talked. “To tell you the truth, seeing you looking so cold and wet, I want to let you inside real quick, and give you a nice, warm bath. But...”

“But?”

"I've...never let anyone into my home before."

"Huh? Oh, yeah? What about Satsuki?"

"No..."

"Ah-hah! Is that right? Hmm."

"...You're happy about that?" she asked with upturned eyes. I thought about it a little.

"If I look it, then maybe I am."

"What's with that?" Toriko laughed, brushing her hair back. "I didn't think you'd come...but you did..."

The half-smile on Toriko's face made it seem she was torn between feeling happy and confused. There was something airy about it, like she didn't have her feet on the ground. Seeing Toriko act in a way I didn't usually see from her, I got anxious again.

"Hey, I'm not going to insist on barging in on you. If you're really against it, I'll head home for today. I already know you're safe and all. Let's just meet up again somewhere outside."

I wasn't the sort that liked to let people into her house either, so I could understand how Toriko felt. For me, my house was my territory. I think it would have been painful for me to let anyone in there for an extended period of time, even if it was Toriko. She must be the same way, so—

"...It's okay."

"Huh?"

"It's okay. Come in."

Toriko looked like she'd found the resolve to do something, so I got scared. "H-Hey, don't force yourself."

"Nah. You worked up the courage to come here. I've got to steel myself too."

Steel herself for what...?

"Come in. I want you to learn about me too," Toriko said, her eyes fixed on me as I stood there, confused.

2

"Sorry the entryway's such a mess. I'll clean it up now," Toriko said as she crouched down and started to move aside the mountain of shoes I'd noticed earlier.

"Nah, it's fine. I'll just take my shoes off wherever. Are all of those yours, Toriko?"

"Yeah. I can't help but buy them, y'know?"

Taking my shoes off in the space she'd opened up, I finally took my first step into Toriko's place.

"Pardon the intrusion..."

Taking the Makarov off the top of her shoe box, Toriko walked in

front of me.

Strictly speaking, this was my second time in Toriko's house. I had come here through the depths of the Otherside once, chasing after Toriko when she'd gone to the other world by herself. But it had given off a different impression then. Last time, it had been an empty room, lacking furniture, or anything else, but there was more to it than just that. I don't think the layouts even matched. Actually, I couldn't remember a single detail about what the inside of her place had been like at that time. Had that been a scene that the Otherside, or my own brain, had created to suit the situation?

I took another look at Toriko's real home. The hall stretched from the entryway, a number of doors on the left and right. The first sliding door on the right-hand side was open, and there was a washroom with a washing machine. In the back of the washroom was a door to the bathroom.

"This is the bathroom. You can fill the tub with hot water, so go ahead and use it."

"You sure?"

"Of course. I'll use the time to tidy up a bit and put on some tea."

Pretty much anyone would want to clean up their home if a guest dropped in without warning. I decided to take her up on the offer and use the bath.

"Here's a towel. Take your time, okay?"

With that said, she closed the washroom door. I waited for her footsteps to get further away, then stripped out of my wet clothes. After hesitating briefly, I put them into the laundry basket. I'd have to ask to hang them up to dry somewhere later.

The bathroom was large and well lit. I took a shower while the tub filled with hot water. Her shampoo and body soap were both expensive types I'd never bought myself. It struck me that this might be why Toriko smelled so good.

It felt incredibly strange, sitting on a stool in the unfamiliar bathroom of someone else's house, washing my head with a shampoo that I'd never used before. What was I even doing here? I was at home just an hour ago, yet now it felt so very far away.

Huh? I feel like I felt something similar just recently...?

It didn't take much thinking before I recalled it. Last evening, I took a bath in the Mayoiga, didn't I? Assuming that wasn't a dream or something.

Why am I a migratory bather in other people's houses? It seemed so nonsensical I smiled to myself.

Toriko probably didn't get it either. She was woken up, and when she answered the door, there I was, soaked to the bone, with a dreadful look on my face. Yeah, of course she'd suspect I was an

impostor.

Especially since my doppelganger had been here before me.

Toriko said the doppelganger crawled into bed with her, didn't she...? Seriously, what was she up to?

The tub finished filling as I was washing myself, and I rinsed the soap off before getting in for a soak.

Sure must be nice, having a big bath like this, I thought idly as I stared up at the ceiling through the steam.

I heard the sound of the washroom door opening, and Toriko called out, "I'll leave a change of clothes here."

"Oh, sure, thanks," I responded reflexively, but hold on. A change of clothes? Toriko's clothes?

Oh... Well... I guess I'm fine with that...

Am I fine with that?

The more I thought, the harder it was to settle down. Unable to relax and soak in the tub, I got out fairly quickly. I'd managed to get warmed up, but it was still maybe a bit wasteful.

As I dried myself with the bath towel, I looked down into the laundry basket. I emptied my wet clothes' pockets and chucked them in the laundry machine. There was a mechanical whine as it spun around. I wouldn't be able to touch them again until they'd finished drying.

What Toriko had left me in their place was simpler than I'd expected. The sort of plain underwear they sold at Muji, as well as some simple one-piece loungewear. She used me like her dress-up doll at the Mayoiga, so I'd wondered what she was going to make me wear this time, even worrying it might be something frilly. This was a bit of a relief. If she'd chosen it to match my preference for plain clothes, I was grateful. The underwear actually looked brand new.

I quickly dried my head, then left the laundry room. Heading towards the back of the hall, I found the living room door open. I poked my head in. My eyes met with Toriko's as she was rushing around.

"I'm out of the bath."

"Wha, already? You're *fast*!"

At some point, Toriko had changed into a set of loungewear consisting of a black t-shirt with gold lines and a flashy floral pattern and a pair of long pants. Her messy bedhead had been brushed too.

What gives? The way she was dressed before was way more relaxed.

"What should I do? I'm not done cleaning at all."

Pretty sure that's because she was getting changed into fancy loungewear. That said, as far as I could see, the place didn't look especially messy.

The living room was attached to the kitchen with a counter

separating them. She had a wooden dining table, and four chairs to go with it. There was a light, beige sofa on the rug, and an LCD TV hanging on the wall. The top of a short bookshelf was decorated with picture stands and framed postcards, potted plants, and dolls that came from a souvenir shop somewhere. It was a well-kept, affluent home—that was my impression. There were books and magazines piled on the table, and a remote control and a tablet lying out on the sofa, but...that's about all the mess I could see.

"It looks totally fine."

"Here's hoping. There's probably something I didn't notice lying around."

She was acting so cornered it was hilarious. With a half-smile, I asked, "What? Do you have that many things that you really wouldn't want me to see?"

"I dunno... Oh, sorry, have a seat. Is coffee good?"

"Sure."

She loses her head like this when I come to visit, but she sure was all too happy to barge into my place before. Even went digging through my closet without permission. Well, given the situation at the time, I can't blame her, though.

I pulled back a chair and sat down. Naturally, the books on the table caught my eye. They had library labels on them. *What's she been reading?* I thought, flipping over the book that was on top of the pile. It said, "The Survivor's Guide to Sex: How to Create Your Own Empowered Sexuality After Childhood Sexual Abuse."

"Uh-huh..."

I didn't see that one coming, and it shook me up. Under it was a pile of books about things like the emotional scars of people who have experienced crimes, and specialist literature on domestic violence survivors.

"Ah!" Toriko cried out as she came back from pouring us coffee and saw the book that I was holding. Before I could say anything, she said, "Um, it's not like that," as if she were making an excuse.

"Not like what?"

"Uh, well... I was thinking I need to learn about you properly..."

I stared at her blankly. I had no idea what this was about. "About me? Come again?"

"Sorawo, um... When you were little, uh..."

I furrowed my brow at the muddled way she was talking. Then, suddenly, I figured it out.

Toriko thinks I went through something pretty horrible in my past...?

Toriko stood there with a mug in each hand, acting indecisive. I was worried something would make her spill them all over, so spoke gently.

“Calm down... Maybe you want to set down the coffee first.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Thanks. Now sit down.”

Toriko sat down with her back hunched. I couldn't tell which of us was the guest.

“Listen... I don't really have that kind of thing in my past.”

“Huh?” Toriko reacted with genuine surprise.

“I mean, why would you think I did?”

“You said that your family were cultists...”

“Yeah, that's a fact.”

“And that you almost got abducted, and that you ran away from home and had to keep on running.”

“Those are facts too. But nothing sexual ever happened.”

“Oh... I see.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay then...” Toriko covered her face and let out a long sigh.

“Have you been thinking that this whole time?”

“I have.”

“I wonder if I said something misleading.”

“No, I think I just started suspecting it on my own.”

I cocked my head to the side, wondering, *How'd she come to a misunderstanding like this?*

“I mean, I know you don't like talking about that time in your life and all...”

“Well, yeah, it's not really worth going into.”

Towards the bottom of the pile there were books on child abuse in cults and the problem of second-generation cultists. I opened one, flipped through, and...the text I saw made me feel so unpleasant I closed it again.

“Not worth going into? Really? When you talk about your past, you sound so casual about it. It always worries me.”

“I don't know what to tell you. I get that, for some people, it would be a serious trauma. Even I know that much.”

“They say people who've been abused dissociate from themselves. Did you know that?”

“What was it called again? The one Kozakura was talking about, where your personality splits? Dissociative fugue, or something like that.”

“I hear it happens to some people. I don't know how it's okay to get into this, and I'm really scared right now, but...” Toriko said cautiously, gauging my reaction before she continued. “Sorawo, you may have been through much worse than you think... If you've forgotten, then that's okay, but I wouldn't want to remind you of it.”

“Hrm... I think it's fine? I think I remember the things I've

experienced, and they just don't bother me, that's all."

Toriko's expression didn't brighten up. I smiled, hoping to reassure her. "I mean, just think about all the scary stuff we've been through together. None of that's stirred up any forgotten memories. I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Well, what about with the Red Person?"

When she said that, I was at a loss for words.

"You really seemed to be suffering that time."

"That's because my memories...my cognition had been messed with."

"It's the same thing. It could happen again, couldn't it? There might be some bombshell lying in your past that I don't know about. Even if you think it's a perfectly normal memory, it might not be... I could set it off without knowing anything, and hurt you. That scares me."

"And that's why you were reading these sorts of books?"

"I thought they might be a good reference. Sorry, for doing it without asking... It feels like I was prying."

"Nah, it's nothing to apologize for. I was shocked when the stuff with the Red Person happened, and thought I was going to go crazy, but that's different."

"How's it different?"

It was an obvious question, but a hard one to answer.

The fear and pain I felt then came from the other me that could have existed, from being forced to confront the possibility of another me whose mother was still alive and who had a happy family. The life that I wished I could have had, but things didn't work out that way. It was a possibility that was completely incompatible with the way I lived now.

Looking back on it with a clear head, I'm mystified as to why I found it so painful, but at the time, I was assaulted by a fear that threatened to undermine the identity I'd so desperately assembled for myself.

But I'm fine now. Because I have Toriko. Because I can definitely believe life is better with her.

I couldn't come up with the words to convey those sorts of personal feelings on the spur of the moment, so instead I said, "Because...you were there for me."

"Me?"

"Yeah."

"Did I do some—Ah!" Toriko covered her mouth as if she'd realized something.

No, you're getting it wrong! It's not because you kissed me!

Or was it? Did her kiss make me okay again?

As I tried to recall, it started to feel like that was the way things had gone, so I was left unable to say anything, and just awkwardly closed my mouth.

The idea that a puke-flavored kiss restored my sanity was the absolute worst. At the same time, I felt like I should apologize to Toriko since she'd had to taste my vomit.

I was the one who'd made her think that, so there was nowhere to direct these feelings I was having.

I stopped thinking. I hung my head, and took a sip from my mug.

"You didn't mind being kissed, did you, Sorawo?"

I almost spewed coffee when she asked me that straight-out. "I... I didn't mind it. Not really."

Flavor aside. But I hadn't been in any position to think about whether I minded or not at the time.

"It happened again after that too. Around twice."

"Yes... It did."

"I initiated those times too. You didn't mind those either?"

"Not really..."

I'd have liked to wriggle my way out of saying so, but I couldn't lie here. She'd figure it out anyway.

I had been expecting a real smug look from her in response, but instead she hung her head, her hair drooping down to touch the table.

"Wh-What?"

"Thank goodness..." Her voice was full of relief.

"You were that worried?"

"Of course I was. Silly."

"Huh?"

"I mean, come on, Sorawo. You never kiss me."

"Huh? Er, that's not..."

As if I could!

As I got indignant at this unjustified accusation, Toriko shot me a resentful glare.

"I don't know what's up with you, Sorawo. I know you definitely love me, and you're willing to trust me, but if I try to get too close, after a certain point, you take this attitude like you're not into it."

"Huh? Wait. Hold on."

"I know that I'm terrible at gauging emotional distance, but watching you, even someone like me couldn't help but notice. You're *always* staring at my face, and I even catch you ogling me sometimes."

"Huh?! Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on a second."

"You're gonna tell me I'm wrong?"

"You're wrong. That was never my intention."

"You just don't realize it yourself, I'll bet."

"Don't try to force something I'm not aware of onto me."

“Sorawo, there aren’t many things about you that you actually display self-awareness of.”

“Wow, insulting much?!”

Toriko sighed. “So that’s what made me think, ‘Maybe Sorawo’s got a lot of hang-ups about sexual stuff.’ Although, if that’s true, the way you’ve been looking at me is pretty weird—”

“I have *not* been looking at you that way!”

“—but I’m sure there are girls like that out there, and I was thinking it’d be nice to close the distance between us a little at a time. But the more I learn about you, the more worried I get. I worry there’s something awful in your past, and that that’s where those hang-ups are coming from.”

“Oh...” I looked over the titles of the books piled on the table again. “Hence the books...?”

Toriko nodded. “I thought I’d study up. I may have just been spinning my wheels and going nowhere—but I wanted to know more about you.”

The awkward smile on Toriko’s face defanged me, and I was unable to do more than stare back at her. Yes, she had been spinning her wheels and going nowhere. I wasn’t as much of a prisoner of my past as Toriko feared. Not as far as I was aware of, at least.

But that wasn’t the problem. I hadn’t been thinking about Toriko the way she’d been thinking about me.

When I first saw the books on the table, I didn’t think anything of them. They were all addressing sexual violence, the victims of crime, domestic violence, and other serious subjects, but what was really going on didn’t click for me, so I never thought about it any deeper than that.

For instance, I could have thought, *Maybe Toriko is having some kind of problem that’s addressed by these sorts of books?*

The fact was that Toriko had apparently been brought up in a loving environment, and I’d never heard anything about her experiencing violence. But still.

Toriko had lost her parents. If I recall, Kozakura said it was in a plane crash.

That being the case, I could have taken an interest in the psychology of those who have lost people close to them in an accident or disaster, and the issues involved in interacting with someone who’s been through that experience. If I wanted to learn about Toriko, that is.

Toriko said her parents were Mama and Mom. So I could have, for instance, taken an interest in lesbian marriage in Canada. I could have wondered what it was like to be raised by two women.

If I wanted to learn more about Toriko, that is.

Even if she ended up just spinning her wheels, Toriko had been trying to learn something about me.

I just wasn't interested. I hadn't even spun my wheels.

"Sorawo?"

Looking concerned, Toriko leaned in to peer closer at me as I fell silent.

Yeah, I sure am bad at dealing with people.

Even now that I'd been made aware of my lack of interest in others, I didn't feel any inclination to change. To be more specific, I wasn't interested in their pasts. The only Toriko I could care about was the one in front of me right now.

Maybe that should have been obvious. I'd become almost a completely different person since meeting her. When I said our anniversary on May 14th was like another birthday for me, I meant that literally. The world before I was born is none of my concern. I don't even want to know what Toriko's relationship with Satsuki Uruma was like.

But Toriko had tried to learn about the person I was before we met.

"Toriko...you're such a good girl."

"Huh?"

"Thanks."

"For what?!" The blank look she gave me was hilarious.

And oh so endearing.

I love this girl.

The thought came to me naturally. It took a moment for it to register, and then I was really, really surprised.

What did I just think?

The emotion that I'd never verbalized had, at some point, taken on a concrete form inside of me.

Toriko gave me a slightly sheepish smile. "So, that answer. Can I have it now? How do you feel about me, Sorawo...?"

3

Once I was asked that question at Toriko's house, with her right in front of me, there was nowhere to run. Besides, I'd come here of my own volition. As I lowered my eyes to the table, I noticed the *Survivor's Guide to Sex* again, and got a little shaken up.

Okay. Yes, I love Toriko. I'm ready to acknowledge that. But looking at it again, are my love and Toriko's love the same? Toriko's romantic love is probably also a sexual love. She says I've been looking at her weirdly too, but I don't really get it.

It's certainly true that I'm always thinking about how pretty she is, and

following her with my eyes, though...

"Sorawo?"

I gave up and spoke. "Uh, yeah... I think I love you too."

"Huh...?"

I couldn't look up. I was terrified of how Toriko would react.

"Hey, don't just mumble. Say it properly."

I hadn't even been audible. Getting desperate, I shouted.

"I love you! I love you!"

When I raised my head, Toriko was staring at me, eyes wide. Now that I'd said it, the only option was to turn around and go on the offensive. I fixed Toriko with a stare, waiting for her response.

"For real?"

"Apparently!"

For some reason, that came out sounding petulant. Toriko sat there with her hands on the table, not stirring an inch. I'd half expected her to jump on it the moment I said I loved her, so this reaction was unexpected. Part of it was simple surprise, but she didn't take her eyes off me at all, like she was looking for an opening to sidle up to some particularly wary prey.

"Do you mean...as a friend?" she asked cautiously.

I shook my head.

"Okay, what kind of love is it, then?"

She's concerned about that part, huh? I tried to search for the right words.

"I dunno. If I had to say, it's a special kind of love... I think."

I heard a rattle as Toriko rose from her seat. I involuntarily recoiled back in mine. Looking down at me, Toriko leaned over, gently extending her right hand.

Her hand touched my cheek.

"So, is it all right for me to interpret what you're saying *that* way?"

"I dunno... What's *that* way?"

"Don't dodge the question."

"You're scaring me. Why are you rubbing my cheeks?"

"Force of habit..."

"Could you fix that habit?"

Toriko's hand wandered from my cheek down to my neck. It tickled, so I pulled away from it. Holding the side of my neck as I looked at a Toriko who seemed like she hadn't hadn't gotten quite enough, I said, "You called us accomplices, didn't you? Said it was the closest relationship in the world."

"Yeah."

"I was happy with that. You put a name on our relationship, Toriko."

"You were pretty fixated on the idea, after all, Sorawo."

"I'm sure you weren't thinking that hard when you said it."

"Honestly, yeah. I said it back when we went Kunekune hunting, right? That was still only the second time we'd met."

"Yeah."

"I think, at the time, I just wanted to get closer to you. I mean, I'd totally forgotten about it until you brought it up again later."

"Despite saying it yourself."

"Sorry," Toriko said.

"Why'd you want to get closer to me?"

I bit back the words, *Wasn't your head full of Satsuki-san at that point?* No other person's name needed to come up in the conversation that I was having with Toriko right now.

"I'd never thought there was another girl exploring the Otherside all by herself, so once I found you, the only thing to do was for us to become friends, right?"

"Well, we're definitely a rare breed."

"And you didn't seem all that against the idea."

"Didn't I? I don't think I'd opened up to you yet at that point. I was thinking, 'What's with her? Why's she acting so friendly?'"

"Hmm?"

"What's that look for?" I asked.

"You say that, but you had a pretty pervy look on your face."

"Wha?!"

"It took me by surprise. Here I am, holding you in my arms, and you go and stare at my face, then your eyes start working their way down. I was like, 'Girl sure has a lot of energy for someone who almost drowned.'"

"So, what? When you were talking about me ogling you before, you meant—"

"Yeah, right from the get-go. From the moment you saw me for the first time."

I was dumbfounded. Given how much was written on my face, was it true? This should have been embarrassing, but I was so lacking in awareness that it wasn't even hitting home.

"I could tell it intuitively. Oh, this girl's fallen in love with me," Toriko said.

"You're too full of yourself."

"Am not. I've had girls fall for me before multiple times, so I know what it's like."

"Multiple times?" I repeated accusingly. Toriko chuckled.

"Don't worry. It's never gone well."

"Oh, sure," I said. I don't know what was so funny, but Toriko burst out laughing.

“Wh-What?”

“You’re so easy to read, Sorawo! It’s adorable,” Toriko explained, wiping the corners of her eyes. “You love me, and you get jealous... From where I’m standing, it’s so obvious you’re into me, but when I try to get closer, you dodge me. What gives?”

“I dunno. Maybe your approach is the problem?”

“Was it that bad?”

“Like at the hot springs...”

“Oh! That was, well, y’know... It was more than I could handle...”

Toriko started sounding like she was making excuses. She looked off into the distance, and her eyes weren’t coming back to me. This was more than she could handle too. How cute.

After looking at Toriko with sober eyes for some time, I asked, “So you’re not okay with us staying ‘accomplices’? That can’t be our relationship?”

Toriko furrowed her brow with consternation. “It can’t... I want to move forward from that.”

“And ‘forward’ is us going out, or being lovers? Is that it?”

“Yeah. That’s right,” Toriko said insistently.

“In your mind, romance is above ‘the closest relationship in the world’? That’s the thing I’m having the hardest time getting. We’ve *already* got the best relationship there is.”

“Hrm...” Toriko thought for a moment before speaking again. “I know you put a lot of value in us being accomplices...and that makes me happy.”

“Mm-hm.”

“And that was enough for me too, at first. But the more you said it, the more I felt like I was being rejected.”

“Huh? Why?”

I was surprised. I’d never considered that before.

“When I was thinking I’d like to get closer to you, you’d say ‘we’re accomplices, right?’ as if to confirm it with me... It felt like you were telling me, ‘Don’t get any closer. This is as far as our relationship goes. You’ve hit a dead end.’ And that made me feel really...lonely.”

I was speechless for a while. “I see... So that’s how you felt about it.”

Toriko nodded. The way she stayed standing beside the table, her shoulders slumped dejectedly, made my chest tighten painfully.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Yeah. I know that’s not how you meant for me to take it. I think that me reading too much into things, and being in too much of a rush played into it too. But...”

Toriko’s voice faded away powerlessly. Her left hand was resting on the table, and I put mine over top of it. When had I stopped

hesitating to do this sort of thing? It was something that I could do not for any romantic reason, but out of a simple desire to cheer her up. Ungloved and exposed, her translucent hand was cold to the touch.

I looked up at Toriko as she hung her head, still sitting in my chair.

“I was thinking the opposite.”

“The opposite?”

“We already had the best possible relationship, accomplices, so what was the point in taking a step down from that to lovers?”

“A step down...?!” It seemed my words took her by considerable surprise, and Toriko stared at me in mute amazement.

“I mean, it’s ‘the closest relationship in the world.’ There’s no way any other relationship could be above it.”

“Okay, your logic checks out, but...” Toriko pursed her lips, unable to accept it.

“If you want to say it’s kind of a false reasoning, maybe you’re right. But that’s really what I was thinking. So whenever you tried to bring romance-y stuff into our relationship, I felt dissatisfied.”

“Dissatisfied? So it’s not that you hated it?”

“Yeah... I haven’t been able to put it into words very well, but I think I get it now. You felt like I was saying ‘let’s stop here, let’s not go any further.’ I felt like you were saying ‘let’s stop having the strongest, ultimate relationship, and settle for something easy to understand like romance instead.’ Being ‘accomplices’ was original to us, something no other people had, but romance is so common you can find it anywhere...is how I felt. It pissed me off, thinking, ‘Why should I have to settle for the kind of relationship that just about anyone could have?’ That feeling still hasn’t changed. And that’s why...”

It took courage to say the next bit to her face. I took a deep breath, steeling myself for it, then said:

“I don’t want us to be ‘lovers.’”

4

I knew Toriko was shocked, so I held up my hand in a “hold on” gesture.

“Hear me out. I want to talk about this properly.”

“O-Okay.”

“You need to sit down?”

“Yeah...” Toriko, who had been on her feet this whole time, took a seat. Not in the chair opposite mine, but in the one beside me this time. I turned to face her again, and spoke.

“First, I want to acknowledge that what you said is right. I knew

how you felt all along, but didn't want to make things romantic, so I played dumb, and dodged the issue. I think that was blatantly obvious to you, though."

"You can't have known all along."

"Huh?"

"I bet you only figured it out recently... You were genuinely clueless, Sorawo."

"Y-You think?"

"Yeah. I sure do."

I averted my eyes from her stare, continuing on regardless. "S-So, anyway? As we were talking, it occurred to me that maybe the things I was dissatisfied about and what you were thinking are pretty similar."

"Hmm...?"

"We each thought that the other person was planning to bring a stop to our relationship, right?"

"Maybe you could say that."

"But that wasn't true at all, right?"

"I don't think I was, at least. How about you, Sorawo?"

"I don't think I was either... Probably," I said hesitantly. Toriko looked at me with her brow furrowed.

"See. There you go, refusing to make me feel secure again."

"No... Urgh, hold on. Just let me move forward a bit at a time."

Maybe seeing me look so anxious was funny to her, because Toriko smiled a little.

"Okay, I'll let you finish," Toriko said even though she must have been beside herself with worry. No matter where my twisted mess of emotions led me, I felt I needed to respond to the trust she'd placed in me.

"Like you sensed, I may have been using the word accomplices to dodge some issue and avoid thinking about it. But I have no doubt it was an incredibly important relationship to me. So I don't think I was entirely mistaken about everything."

"I don't think that either."

"I put some thought into why being accomplices was 'the closest relationship in the world.' I think it's probably because of a shared secret."

"A secret?"

"And since we're being called accomplices, there's something shady about it. Something no one else must know. A thing we can't tell anyone about..."

"Like violating the Firearm and Sword Possession Control Law?"

"That one's a one-way ticket to jail if we get caught."

We looked at one another and laughed.

“Are you feeling this too, Toriko?”

“Yeah, I get you. It’s a real thrill.”

“Thank goodness. There’s obvious crimes like that one, or course—but I think we’re ‘accomplices’ when it comes to the Otherside too. I don’t want to tell anyone, and don’t want them involved. You and I are the only ones who need to know.”

“I think you feel that more strongly than I do, Sorawo.”

“Originally, I wanted a world all to myself. When we first met, I thought you were in the way.”

“I thought you were acting pretty harsh for a girl who fell in love with me at first sight. I thought you were trying to hide it. It was cute.”

“Oh, yeah? I don’t care about that, but...basically, what I’m getting at is that our relationship as accomplices lasts as long as we share a secret. It never goes away. That’s why it’s so strong and intimate. Lovers break up, married couples get divorced, and even families fall apart. But accomplices? Even if they grow to hate one another, they’re still inseparable. If they really want to end the relationship, killing each other’s probably the only way out.”

“Sorawo-sensei, I’m just asking for my own reference, and it’s not that I want to do this, but...”

“Yes? What is it, Toriko-san?”

“In general, if one of the accomplices spills her guts, and sells her partner to the cops, does the relationship still continue?”

“If that happens, then you chose the wrong person to be your accomplice, wouldn’t you say?”

“In the movies, they sell each other out when their family gets taken hostage.”

“The problem there is that they made a family.”

“You sure are something sometimes, Sorawo.”

“Can I take that as a compliment?”

“Nah. This time I’m bad-mouthing you.”

“To give a more serious answer... That’s the end, isn’t it? If they no longer have secrets they can share, then the relationship is finished, no matter how strong it was.”

“Sorawo, you told Akari and Natsumi about the other world, right?”

“...”

“How’s that figure into this?”

“That was... Well, that.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Wait, did that bother you more than I thought, Toriko?”

“I was thinking, doesn’t that go against what she was just saying?”

“I didn’t spill the secret because I wanted to... It’s just, since they

already got involved, I felt I needed to take responsibility for that..."

"Fine, I get it. But in that case, I guess I want to ask what you think about taking responsibility when it comes to me?"

"I think that's what we're about to discuss."

Toriko nodded. We'd gotten off track, but I was able to get back to the main topic.

"Out of all the relationships represented in the word accomplices, the one I treasured most was the idea that we could share a secret. So long as that's still true, then even if what we call our relationship changes, I think I'll be fine."

"So, for example...you'd be fine with us being lovers, or family?"

I shook my head. "Sorry. Those just don't click with me. I can't help but feel that lovers stop getting along, then their hearts drift apart when they can't tolerate each other anymore, and when it comes to family, you must know I don't have a good impression of the concept."

"I get that family is a lost cause with you, but maybe you're just being prejudiced when it comes to lovers. There's plenty of people whose romantic relationships are going well, and a lot of them keep on going for a long time. You and I have a lot of differences, but we've been fine together for this long, so... I think we'd get by just fine, don't you?"

"I dunno... I just can't imagine it. Maybe that's because I'm too much of a child, though." I always ended up mumbling when I talked about stuff like this. "Let me turn the question around, Toriko. When you say you want a romantic relationship with me, what is it that you're imagining? What would change if we went out?"

"Well..." Toriko lowered her eyes bashfully.

"If we know what that is, maybe you can still have that sort of relationship even without us labeling ourselves as lovers? What is it you want us to do if we go out?"

"I want to have...with you."

"Huh? Have what?"

I leaned in closer, thinking I hadn't heard her. Toriko raised her face, and said it clearly this time. "I want to have sex with you."

"Uh..."

As I sat there speechless, Toriko looked straight into my eyes and went on. "I want to touch you, kiss you, hold you a whole lot. If you say no at this point, I'll give up. But if I'm being forthright, that's what I want to do with you."

"O-Oh, I see."

That was all I managed to choke out. I'd be lying if I said I didn't see this coming. I'd long since figured out that Toriko was a closet perv from all the things she'd said and done before now. But because

of that, I didn't expect her to come right out and say it.

Normally, Toriko wouldn't talk like this. I'd never initiated a conversation on the topic before either. It must have taken an incredible amount of courage.

"What do you think? How about you, Sorawo?"

I was at a loss for how to answer her earnest question. I lacked the words. That being the case, I just said what I was thinking.

"To be honest with you, I don't really know."

"Does being told that make you feel uncomfortable at all?"

"I dunno... It did surprise me."

"Just checking, but does it feel wrong because we're both women?"

"That doesn't really matter at this point..."

"I figured." Toriko nodded knowingly. I'm sure some people would get really hung up on that detail. But we were well past the point where it made sense to bring that up. It was the first time either of us voiced the question, and only for confirmation's sake, but it was over in a moment without it ever becoming an issue.

If anything, the problem we—no, *I* had may have come even before that. I was too much of a child to talk about sex...

"I don't know what you're thinking, Sorawo, so I'll say this first, but I don't think this is a bad thing at all. If we're able to communicate properly, then the sex will be wonderful, and it's great for helping us get along."

"S-Sure." I'd never had anyone talk to me so openly about sex stuff before, so I was getting intimidated. As I was thinking how best to respond and keep the conversation going, Toriko suddenly put on a shy smile.

"Or so I say, but... It's not like I know enough to talk... Not really."

Her face was so adorable when she admitted this with some embarrassment that my heart skipped a beat.

Did I just look at Toriko in a pervy way?

I dunno... I think I just thought she was cute in an ordinary way. It's normal to find things adorable, and I feel like that's nonsexual.

"What made you think that way, Toriko? Is that the culture in Canada?"

"Nah, sex ed in Canada is super conservative. I don't think it's all that different from Japan."

"Huh? Oh, I see."

"If anything, this is my family's influence. You know how I come from a house with a Mom and a Mama, right? When I was little, like you'd expect, I ended up wondering why all the other kids had daddies but I didn't. They explained it to me properly, and even when

I grew up, they provided an environment where I felt okay talking to them about sexual stuff. And—”

Toriko stopped, apparently reconsidering what she had been about to say.

“What?”

“There’s another reason, but it’s a little... I don’t know how you’ll take it, so I’m a bit scared to say.”

“Huh? What’s this...? Now you’ve got me curious.”

“Well... Later, okay?”

“Are you just not interested in sex at all, Sorawo?” Toriko asked me, leaving that mystery hanging in the air.

“Uhh, not really...”

“Even with the way you’ve been staring at me?”

“No, I haven’t been... That’s you, Toriko.”

“Oh, come on. Of course I look.”

“Don’t you ‘come on’ me. When we were at the hot springs, you were staring so hard I thought my skin was going to peel off.”

“I just can’t take my eyes off of you... Even when I know you’ll think I’m being weird. It’s a mystery to me too.”

“Scary.”

“On the other hand, Sorawo, you didn’t really stare that much when I got naked at the hot springs.”

“Do you understand what a public bathing space is? If I was staring with so many people around, I’d look suspicious.”

“Didn’t stop me, though.”

“Yeah, which is why you looked dodgy. Really dodgy.”

“We had the place to ourselves when we went at night, didn’t we?”

“That’s not what I went there for!”

Toriko let out a weary sigh. “I’m losing my confidence. I went all out and got naked for you, but you wouldn’t even look.”

“I thought you were pretty.”

“You mean it?”

“Yeah, for sure. You’re *always* pretty, Toriko.”

“I don’t know if I buy that.”

When we were talking like this, I felt like we could go on forever. Even right after she just, uh...expressed her desire to do me.

I get that she wants to do it. That, I understand.

...And?

Having said her piece, Toriko looked a little relieved. I guess the ball was in my court. What now...?

I couldn’t envision myself doing what Toriko wanted. When she kissed me, I got super surprised, and my heart raced, but I didn’t get into that sort of mood. I didn’t mind her touching me, but it tickled.

Yes, I loved Toriko. I wanted to be with her. It felt reassuring when we hugged or held hands. But I don't think that means it has to be sexual. Could Toriko have just been imagining it when she thought I was looking at her that way?

"I thought you'd be shocked when I said I didn't want to be lovers."

"Yeah..."

"But you still seem awfully peppy, all things considered."

"Huh? What? Should I have fallen to my knees and burst into tears?"

"Don't get angry. That's not what I'm saying, it's just... I thought maybe you saw this coming."

"It's not that I predicted it. I just had something to think about," Toriko murmured after a short silence.

"What?"

"Remember how you had amnesia before?"

"Ohh, yeah. The time T-san got me."

"You looked at me then, and you asked, 'Were we lovers?'"

"Sorry..."

While I was feeling embarrassed about having that dredged back up again, Toriko continued without looking at me. "I was really shocked when I heard you. So much that my hand moved before I knew what had happened."

"...Hey, that's right! What was that about? It's been bugging me all this time. What'd you hit me for?"

No amount of shock justified that. As I thought back on it indignantly, a mix of complicated emotions crossed Toriko's face.

"Because something... Something wasn't right about it."

"Like what?"

"The word 'lovers' coming out of your mouth." Toriko furrowed her brow, looking doubtful of what she was saying. "All that time, I had been thinking, 'I want to go out with Sorawo properly. I want a relationship where we can call each other lovers.' When you said the word, I should have been happy, and my chest should have tightened, but instead it just felt so *wrong*. Like, 'No, this isn't what I wanted.'"

"So it wasn't because I'd lost my memory? More of a 'Don't you spew those empty words at me!' kinda thing?"

"I'm not that much of a ruffian." Toriko shook her head, smiling. "No, I don't think that was it. I had been pushing towards us becoming lovers without ever questioning it, and I was shocked to find that at some point that had stopped being what I wanted."

"Okay, I kinda get that. But how'd it lead to you hitting me?"

"I got mad and did it on impulse..."

"Yikes."

"Maybe I was feeling lonely and wanted to touch you."

"That's some real yikes material there, Toriko."

I figured I had a right to say something about this. She'd even jabbed her finger into my eye, after all.

"Anyway, for a moment there, I didn't know what I wanted my relationship with you to be. It came back to me gradually, but in some corner of my heart there's been a sense that something is off ever since then. So, when I say I want to go out, or that I want us to be lovers, it's more...I'm trying to put it in a way that comes across easily, I guess?"

It looked like it wasn't just me. Toriko had been doing her own thinking on the subject too.

"And that's why you're not that shaken up today?"

"When you tell me right to my face you don't want to be lovers, of course that makes me feel something. But... That's how it is. If you say you don't want to get caught up on names, and we should find a relationship that works for us, then maybe I'm down for that."

"Oh, good. I thought we were going to argue more."

"We can argue. I'm more than able to vent all my pent up frustrations at you and argue like crazy."

"Stop it. Don't hit me with that kind of super move."

"Maybe I will. I'm starting to think it'd be incredibly refreshing."

"Could you not?" Toriko was clearly amused by my discomfort.

"You're a bit of a sadist at times. You know that, Toriko?"

"Not as much of one as you are."

"Wha?"

"You can be a bit of a bully. Just occasionally, though."

I couldn't deny it. "Yeah, I'm a real piece of work."

"Hrmm. Well, I think it still falls within the bounds of what's normal, though."

Was that supposed to make me feel better? I laughed. "Normal? Is this normal?"

"I think we all want to pick on people a little sometimes. If you were like that all the time, it'd be bad news, though. You're a good girl, deep down, and you've loosened up on the cold attitude you show to everyone who isn't me... I love the person you are, Sorawo."

"Y-Yeah?"

"Yeah. Being with you made me love you even more. No matter what name we put on our relationship, I'll still love you."

When she suddenly came at me with such direct words, I didn't know what I should do. I couldn't imitate this side of Toriko...and I could never get used to it.

"I...love you too," I replied, awkwardly I'm sure. Toriko smiled, leaning forward in her chair.

“Can I kiss you?”

“Urkh... F-Fine.”

“What do you mean, ‘fine’...?” Toriko laughed. Her face drew closer.

My lips stiffened, waiting. Hers softly brushed them. They touched lightly, just once...then parted.

When I opened my eyes, Toriko cocked her head to the side, saying, “I don’t get the sense you dislike it, though.”

“Well... It’s not unpleasant. Didn’t I say that?”

“But not actively disliking it’s as far as you’ll go, huh.”

My heart clenched at the sad look on Toriko’s face. If I could be a bit more proactive, I’m sure that would make her happy, but what corner did I need to turn to make that happen?

Feeling I should do at least something for Toriko, I reached out and patted her on the head. She didn’t seem surprised; she closed her eyes and let me pet her in silence. As I went on stroking her silky head, questioning whether she was enjoying it, Toriko let out a satisfied sigh, so I got frightened and pulled my hand back.

When she opened her eyes, the words “*You’re stopping?*” were written plainly on her face.

Seeing the way her expression looked so soft it seemed to be melting, I couldn’t help but murmur, “Does romance do this to everyone?”

“Do what...?”

“Change them. You’re not the usual, sharp Toriko.”

“Anyone would be like this when the love of their life pets them.”

“You think?”

I felt left behind. It wasn’t like that for me...

I averted my eyes with a feeling of loneliness. It was the middle of the day, but it was still raining outside, giving this scene unfolding in the living room a low color saturation. The little details I hadn’t spotted finally rose to my consciousness. The pictures on the wall and shelves were probably of her family. Looking closer, a number of them were of Toriko. She was little, and her face was younger... It was a Toriko from long ago.

There were a number of pictures of her with two adult women. A dark-haired Asian woman, and a blonde white woman were both smiling happily.

Following my gaze, Toriko turned to look behind her.

“Ohh, right. You’ve never seen them before, have you?” Toriko stood up, heading over to pull down a largish photo from the wall. “Let me introduce you. This is Mom,” she said, pointing to her Asian mother, “and this is Mama,” she finished, pointing to her white mother.

“Mom, Mama, this is Sorawo. She’s an important person to me.”

“Uh, hi...” I bowed my head somewhat confusedly, having just been introduced to a photograph. “Mama was a soldier, right? What did Mom do?”

Looking at Mama’s solid build, I could believe she was in the military. The other photos on the wall featured her in camo, as well as full ceremonial dress. As for Mom, on the other hand, I couldn’t guess her occupation at a glance. Many of the pictures were of her in relaxed, indoor clothes, though. Come to think of it, I don’t think Toriko ever told me before.

“Mom was...a comic artist.”

“Huh? You mean a mangaka?”

“Well, yeah.” For some reason, Toriko sounded evasive about this.

“Oh, wow! What kind of stuff did she draw?”

“Um, well...”

After some hesitation, she looked at a door facing on to the living room.

“Could you come with me for a moment?” she asked.

“Huh? Sure.” Once I stood up and followed her as requested, Toriko opened the door.

Unlike the living room, which was cleaned up, there was a lot to take in about this room. It’s not that it wasn’t clean. In fact, it was well organized, but there was just fundamentally a lot of stuff in here. The walls were buried behind bookshelves and glass display cases. Figures of female characters lined the cases, while the shelves were stuffed absolutely full of manga and large-sized artbooks. If you asked someone to draw what an otaku’s room looked like, this is the kind of thing you would get.

There was a big desk in one corner, and it was completely covered in sketchbooks and art supplies. The PC, monitor, and tablet were all slightly older designs, probably several generations out of date at this point. They were from when Toriko’s mom was alive.

“This was Mom’s work room?”

“Yeah. Look behind you.”

“Hm?”

As I turned, a ridiculously vibrant bookshelf jumped into view. The spines of the books were covered in groups of women in various states of undress. The amount of exposed skin was incredible, and nearly all of them had a yellow oval with bold black text declaring them to be “Adult Comics.”

“Mom was an erotic manga artist.”

I doubted my ears at these words I’d never expected to hear come out of Toriko’s mouth. As my brain shut down, Toriko reached out and pointed out a number of volumes on one of the middle shelves.

"These are Mom's books."

"...Her pen name's Canadensis, huh?"

"Wanna read them?"

"M-Maybe not right this moment."

It was clear from their spines that they were pervy, and I was a little taken aback by that.

"You read them, Toriko...?"

"They're age-restricted, so she wouldn't let me while she was still alive."

Toriko's expression was a mixture of sad, lonely, and awkward. I didn't know how to react to this information for a while.

"It... It's pretty rare for a woman to draw erotic manga, isn't it?"

"You'd think that, right? Turns out it's not uncommon at all."

"Oh, really?"

"I hear there's tons of them. Mom told me that, when she came to Japan, a lot of her friends who were in the same industry helped her out."

"Hmm..."

"Mom originally bought this place so that she'd have somewhere to work while she was in Japan. She started drawing manga in Canada, but the regulations on sexual expression there got pretty tight there for a while. I hear she could've gotten arrested. Don't know how it is now, though. Mom was someone who wanted to draw stories with sexual themes, so, after agonizing over it for a while, I'm sure, she made the decision to set up a workplace in Japan and relocate here."

"Uh-huh..."

"I hear it was hard for her, going back and forth between Canada and Japan, but...Mama had to fly all around the world for her missions, and she could never say where she was, so Mom was able to laugh off the inconvenience, saying she had it the better of the two of them."

"And where were you in all of this?"

"It depended. I'd stay at Grandma's place, or home alone, and sometimes I'd come over here to play..." Toriko wore a nostalgic smile as she told me about her past.

"So, is this the other reason you alluded to earlier? Why it was easy to talk to them about stuff..."

"Yeah, that's right. She wouldn't show me what she drew, but even when I was a child she explained what it was she did for a living. She said it was a fun, creative job, and nothing to be ashamed of. She was proud of her work. Thinking back, she may have been exaggerating a bit so that I wouldn't feel inferior because of it, but I don't think she was lying. She seemed to be having the time of her life. That's why I was never embarrassed about it... Buuut..." Toriko

got a little awkward here. “Once I was talking to the girl who I wanted to be my lover... I was kinda hesitant to come out and say, ‘Oh, yeah, my mom was an erotic manga artist, by the way.’ Sorry, Mom.”

After apologizing to the volumes on the bookshelf, Toriko glanced in my direction, as if trying to gauge my response. “What did you think?”

“What? Well... I was surprised.”

Toriko chuckled at my answer. “You’re always getting surprised, Sorawo. Anything else?”

“Uhh? I dunno. That it’s a shame that you couldn’t read your mom’s work while she was still alive...?”

As I struggled for something to say, Toriko went from staring at me to shaking her head, overcome with emotion.

“You’re surprised, but you’re still accepting of it.”

“What’s to accept? It is what it is. There’s no good or bad in that.”

“Can I hug you?”

“Sure...?”

Toriko approached and wrapped her arms around me. I was standing in front of a bookshelf that could hardly be called romantic as she hugged me tight.

Life’s full of mysteries. You never know what’s going to happen, I thought as I looked at the bookshelf over Toriko’s shoulder.

Who would’ve known there could be such a touching scene right next to a shelf stuffed full of erotic manga with titles so incredible that I couldn’t possibly name them...?

I remembered that, when Toriko came to my house before, she’d stood in front of my ghost story books, looking like she wanted to say something. *Oh, so this is what it was,* I convinced myself. I had just thought she was weirded out by them, but—no, I feel like she was still weirded out, but maybe she’d wanted to talk about this and gave up without saying anything.

“Sometimes I get teased when people find out Mom drew pervy stuff,” Toriko said, her voice muffled as she buried her face in my shoulder. It tickled when she talked like that, and she had a history of biting that was making it hard to relax, but I bore with her and listened.

“They’d say stupid stuff like, ‘Your mom drawing that kind of stuff went and turned you into a woman-lover too’... That seriously pissed me off. It’s got nothing to do with it.”

“R-Right.”

“I know you’re not the type to say that kind of thing, Sorawo, but of course I was still scared. Sorry I couldn’t tell you for all this time.”

“N-Nah... It’s no biggie. Doesn’t matter.”

To be perfectly honest, the idea did cross my mind. Just a little.

The half-teasing words “You sure you don’t want to do me because you’ve been influenced by this sort of manga?” had even made it to the drafts pile inside my brain. But the mood didn’t feel right for saying it, and I worried I was going to step in something, so I refrained.

Thank goodness I never said it. Even if I meant to lighten the mood, or was trying to get a laugh, it was best if I never said anything sarcastic. Because my sense of humor was devastatingly bad. I’d never been more grateful to Kozakura for driving that point home.

I stroked Toriko’s back as I deleted that particular draft from my brain. She must’ve gone through all sorts of unpleasant experiences that I know nothing about.

I didn’t think she was lying when she said she was proud of Mom’s work, but I couldn’t imagine she’d never struggled with it. What she’d said to me had come after a lot of thought and time spent sorting out her feelings. Overcoming her parents’ deaths, her love of women, and so much more...

“Do you want to see Mama’s room too?” Toriko asked quietly, seeming to have settled down as I stroked her. I nodded, seeing no reason to refuse. Toriko let go of me, and opened another door on the wall next to us.

The room next to the otaku room was comparatively plain. It had a small bookcase, a desk, and a large bed. That’s it. It was like a hotel room. There were a number of pictures hanging on the wall at the head of the bed, and a little cross. Come to think of it, I remember Toriko mentioning that Mama was a Christian.

“There’s not much here, huh?” I commented.

“Mama generally didn’t live here. This was just a space set up so she could stay over whenever she happened to drop by and visit Japan. So it was usually Mom’s bedroom.”

“Hmm.”

I guess that makes this their shared bedroom, then, huh? It all feels a bit too raw, seeing someone else’s parents’ bedroom.

I looked around despite feeling a little awkward to be in here. The pictures on the wall included Toriko as a child. She was in primary or middle school. Despite being a kid, she was slender and it was hard to estimate her age from her height. The braces stood out on the toothy grin on her face, but she was still just as adorable as any kid her age. She wore a polo shirt with vibrant colors, making her look like a tennis player or something. But instead of a racket, she was carrying a big gun.

“What’s that a photo of? You’re carrying a gun in it.”

“Oh, this? It’s from a shooting competition. Ever heard of a 3-gun

match?"

"Never."

"You use a rifle, shotgun, and handgun to shoot targets as you move along the course and compete for the best time. This is from when I came in second at the Junior tournament."

"Whoa, that's awesome."

"When Mama first started teaching me, I couldn't land a single shot, but with practice I was able to make second place... I was really happy."

"Hmm. I wish I could've seen you back then."

"I've still got the video. Wanna see?"

"Huh, for real? I do."

"Sure thing. Let's watch it together later," Toriko said gleefully, sitting down on the bed. There was no cloud of dust, so I could see she kept it clean.

"So that's where you polished your skills with firearms."

"Did I never mention it?"

"Not that I can remember."

"I wonder why I didn't. There wasn't really anything to hide about it."

"Maybe I just never showed interest."

"That's it. You've got that side to you, Sorawo!"

"Seems pretty likely you may have mentioned it at an after-party, and then we drank so much that I forgot about it too."

"That's such a thing with you, Sorawo. Sometimes I think you're just not interested in me."

She was hitting on a sore spot for me. "Erm... Well..."

"Don't just stand there. Have a seat."

"Uh, okay."

Maybe she realized I was about to start making excuses, because she gestured to me with a sober look in her eyes, and I sat down next to her like she wanted.

"Listen, it's not that I'm not interested in you. Obviously. I think you understand that, though."

"I dunno. You're hard to understand, Sorawo."

Didn't you say that I was easy to understand, and that was cute, just a little while ago?

"How should I put this...? So long as you're there with me, Toriko, I'm already satisfied with that, you know?"

"Hey, hearing that doesn't make me very happy."

"Yeah... I just figured that out recently."

"Hmm?"

"I've been realizing I don't know anything about you. I just thought I did. For this whole year."

“How recently is ‘recently?’” she asked.

“This week, I guess?”

Toriko’s eyes widened when I told her. “That *is* recent.”

“I told you it was.”

“No way... I’ve been telling you I love you, and you’ve been like that the whole time? Don’t you feel bad? For me.”

“Yeah, I do feel bad,” I acknowledged and she jabbed me in the upper arm. “Sorry, okay.”

“I’m not going to let this slide.”

“Well, if we’re getting into details, it was earlier... You know, when I went to your university, and I saw through your eyes in the mirror...”

“You didn’t notice my feelings until you saw through my eyes, huh?”

“I-I had some idea.”

“Augh, just shut up.”

This time, she jabbed me in the shoulder...or so I thought, until my body fell over on the bed. Toriko was peering over me from the side. Then she changed position to get on top of me.

Huh...? Did she just push me down?

“Oh, jeez. What do I have to do to make you understand?”

“Huh?”

“Hey, Sorawo—”

“Wai—”

This time, she locked lips with me without consent.

Yikes. She’s serious. She’s holding me down like she means it.

As I panicked, I had to ask myself if this was okay. Was I all right with us just getting on with it here?

Or was I not?

Did I hate this? Should I refuse her?

I don’t hate it.

The thought suddenly popped into my head, shocking me.

Oh, so I don’t hate this.

Seriously?

But I’m still not that aroused.

Is that okay?

Won’t I disappoint Toriko?

As I was thinking how to change gears and accept Toriko despite my massive hesitation, the cross on the wall caught my eye.

No, this isn’t it.

I don’t like this.

“T-Toriko! Wait! Stay, girl!”

“Aww... Why?”

As I pushed her off of me, Toriko looked at me with eyes that had

little room left for restraint. She had the same face as when she kissed me in the love hotel on the Otherside. A shudder ran down my spine, at her intensity more than her desire. I desperately shook my head.

“Not here!”

“Why not?”

“You shouldn’t have to ask! This is your parents’ bedroom, isn’t it?!”

Toriko blinked as if I’d suddenly slapped her, then looked around the room.

I continued, saying, “Don’t you just hate the idea of doing it in your parents room?! It’s the absolute worst!”

Toriko was silent for several seconds. She looked down at me again. “Where would you be okay with?”

“U-Uh, I don’t know... Oh, your room! Why don’t we go there? You still haven’t let me see it yet, right?” I blurted out on the spur of the moment.

“Does this girl understand what she’s saying?”

I could practically read Toriko’s mind as she stared at me. Because I was thinking essentially the same thing:

“What do I think I’m saying?!”

I don’t want to do it here, so take me to your room... I’d basically just given her the okay, hadn’t I?!

It was too late to take it back. Those words were irreversible.

“Okay. Fine by me.” Toriko slowly sat up, taking me by the hand. “Let’s go, then.”

“Y-Yeah...” I had to nod.

As she opened the door to the hall, and headed to her own room, Toriko never let go of my hand.

5

“This...is my room.”

Toriko only let go of my hand once the door was closed behind us. Did she think I was going to make a break for it if I had the chance? She seemed super tense, and her hand was all sweaty.

As for me, I surprised myself by actually calming down a little once I was inside the room. The moment we entered Toriko’s room, something in the air changed.

A single bed with the blankets pulled back. A laptop placed diagonally on the desk and a power cord stretching out towards the power strip on the floor. A pile of thick, English books covered in sticky notes, possibly textbooks or research material for one of her university courses. A closet that was half-open, its contents a mess. Near a little box full of cosmetics, there was a container of body cream

and an eye shadow palette that wouldn't fit inside it.

"It's a good room," I said, voicing my opinion without meaning to.

"Yeah?" Toriko sounded bewildered.

I realized that, ever since I'd entered Toriko's house, there had been something that felt off that I wouldn't normally notice.

Mom's work room and Mama's bedroom had both been dusted despite their owners being gone. If I thought about who was cleaning them, it had to be Toriko. When I thought that she'd been living in this house all alone this whole time, keeping her deceased parents' rooms clean, before I could think she was tidy or a neat freak, I got this vague sense of unease about it.

When you live alone in a big house, there's bound to be things you don't notice, and spots that get left uncleaned. That's how it was with Kozakura's place, and it was to be expected. And yet, despite having taken a look around the apartment, there had been no such oversights here.

This home was a grave, and Toriko the crypt keeper—that's the image that I was getting. The sudden feeling of resistance I'd felt when we were in the bedroom might have come from that mental association. Even if it weren't the place where her parents had once slept, it was almost like flirting in front of a Buddhist altar.

After entering Toriko's room, I finally got it.

This room has color. It's the room of a living person.

I turned to look behind me. Toriko was staring at me with a torn look on her face.

I feel like this is the first I've seen of the living Toriko since I entered her home.

Her expression looked uneasy, without composure. She wanted me, but also feared rejection.

Despite the way she'd been breathing heavily through her nose as she led me here by the hand, now Toriko was just standing there awkwardly. As if once she'd dragged me into her room she didn't know what to do anymore. Maybe as we entered what remained of the domain of the living inside this house of the dead, Toriko had come back to life.

I crossed the room and sat on the bed. Toriko's bed. Then I looked up at Toriko.

Not knowing what to say, I just patted the spot beside me on the bed. Toriko wandered over and sat down next to me. It was the same position as we'd been in in the other bedroom, only we were about a hand's width closer this time.

Toriko couldn't bring herself to look at me. Honestly, I think the ability to suddenly find my composure at a time like this was one of the worst parts of my personality.

“Toriko... You really do want to do it with me?” I asked, eliciting a nod from Toriko.

“Is it something that’s really important to you?”

“Yeah... It’s important,” Toriko replied bashfully, and suddenly I found myself thinking how cute she was, and how dear she was to me.

It wasn’t a big deal—at least not to me, that is—but just how much had she agonized over it? Letting her imagination run wild and worrying about all sorts of things that she didn’t need to. Trying to be considerate of me, yet at the same time unable to overcome her own desire... Her internal turmoil was palpable. The awkward lust she had for me was dazzling to behold. The way Toriko was now, there was no way she could think of sex, romance, and love as separate things. They were part of one big thing, all mixed together, and directed at me. Her earnest feelings overwhelmed me—but, you know, it didn’t feel bad.

I feel like I had started to interpret that feeling of “I don’t dislike this” in a more positive way. There was no getting around the fact that there was a difference in intensity in the way we felt about each other, but I was thinking that, maybe, I didn’t need to feel bad about that or use it as an excuse.

It would take courage, of course, but I wet my lips—then made up my mind to say it.

“I-If...I say okay, what’re you going to do?”

Toriko covered her mouth as if she was about to cry. “Be happy...”

Were her eyes moist because of excitement, or was it because she was overcome with emotion?

If she’s gonna look that delighted... I’d feel way too bad for her if I turned her down now.

“Erm... I don’t know if I’m going to be any good... But is that still okay?”

Toriko just nodded mutely, unable to utter anything more in response. I finally found my resolve.

“Well, then...”

I fidgeted awkwardly as I spoke. *How does this kind of thing get started?*

“...Okay. Umm, go for it?”

The way I said it wasn’t sexy or cool at all. But it was apparently good enough. Toriko reached out and placed her hands on my clothes.

“G-Go easy on me,” I said, just to be safe, but I’m not sure Toriko even heard me. Her right hand, beautiful all the way down to the tips of her fingers, and her translucent left hand were both trembling with nervous anticipation.

“Ow...!”
“Oh! Sorry.”
“That hurts.”
“Oh...!”
“Hey, I said that hurts.”
“Huh? No way?!”
“Um...”
“...”

7

Roughly half an hour later, I was comforting Toriko as she hugged her knees and looked depressed.

“Hey, listen, part of it is my own lack of experience.”

“Was I that awful...?”

“There, there... It’s okay. Don’t beat yourself up over it, all right?”

“Sorry... For blowing it like this after you finally said it was okay...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Uhh, y’know, there’s a first time for everything...”

I’m sure that Toriko was trying her best, but, well, that was thirty minutes that led to a whole lot of nothing. Okay, maybe that’s taking it too far. It was a stimulating experience, I’ll give it that.

For one thing, it was a fresh surprise for me, finding out that things could go this way. It was all completely different from how I’d imagined it.

First, Toriko took off my clothes, then stripped herself—at which point whatever little composure I had left went out the window, and as I lost my head it started before I knew what was happening, and then...

It kinda just hurts, and tickles...? I thought, and my head gradually cooled back down. Once I’d shifted gears, my excitement settled, and I think Toriko picked up on that too. Toriko had already been tense enough as it was, so she panicked and got sloppier, which only made it hurt more...

And that brings us back to where we were now.

I think that not being used to letting other people touch me was a big part of it. I couldn’t help but brace myself, and I got all tense. Even when it was Toriko doing the touching, that unfortunately didn’t change anything. The level of contact needed for this was way higher than holding hands, or kissing, and I hadn’t been ready to accept it yet.

That’s why, while Toriko *did* panic, and she wasn’t able to do it very well, that wasn’t all there was to it. If I were to divide the blame

between us, I'd say it was something like 80-20, with the larger share belonging to me.

Not that telling her that would make her feel any better...

It was a shame disappointing Toriko, like I'd always suspected I would, but the experience was still a little bit entertaining to me.

Up until a little while ago, we had each desperately been trying to read the other's next move, and had gotten even more desperate once things started, but now we were both lying in bed, bare naked, one depressed, the other consoling.

I'd never have seen this coming. Sex can really make this sort of awkward and silly thing happen...

Once the mood was gone, nudity was just nudity. I'd seen Toriko naked before at the hot springs, and a number of times after that when we went to the public bath. Even when she was depressed, she was still beautiful and radiant.

The way Toriko hung her head was so pathetically piteous that it made her all the more adorable. I wanted to give her a pat on the head, but the mere one meter between us felt so far away.

"So you messed up. Who cares?"

"But..."

"I don't mind, and I'm not going to start hating you over it."

"Yeah..."

I hesitated over whether I should say this next bit, but finally added, "Listen... I don't know if this is any consolation, but it turns out I like cuddling with you."

"Huh?!" Toriko raised her head, looking surprised. It was no lie. I may not have been aroused, but as we held each other, our skin touching, without any clothes between us, I realized I really liked it. Toriko was smooth, warm, and smelled good. I felt a sense of satisfaction just holding her.

"So, uh, even if we can't do it, I'm fine with sleeping together like this. Is that not enough for today?"

After I fought off my embarrassment and made this suggestion, Toriko looked at me in disbelief. "Why do you gotta say something so cuuute...?" she moaned.

"Come again?"

Seeing the blank look on my face, Toriko sighed. "Augh, jeez... I'm the only one turned on here..."

"Y-Yeah?"

Fair enough. I wasn't even remotely aroused.

Toriko's this depressed, but she's still all hot and bothered?

Averting her eyes as she noticed my bewilderment, Toriko seemed to get desperate. "Ahh... Maybe I should just do it by myself," she murmured.

It was as if I'd been struck by lightning.

What? What'd she just say?

Maybe...she should just do it...by herself? Is that what she said?

Toriko says that kind of thing?

Toriko does that kind of thing???

That's just so...ridiculously pretty, and unbelievably pervy!

That concept, that vision, tore through my brain with an impact like you wouldn't believe.

I...

I wanna see it!!!!!!

Unmasked desire exploded inside of me. The parts inside me that hadn't come together quite right before now finally found where they belonged, and it was almost audible as they snapped into place.

This is it.

This is where my switch was.

Looking at the shock on my face, Toriko finally noticed that too. She could read me like a book; there was no way she *wouldn't* have noticed.

Still, perhaps because of how I'd changed so much in an instant, Toriko seemed as bewildered as I was. She sat up straight, looking at me, then began touching herself a little, as if still half-doubting it, and struck a pose as if testing me.

That alone was enough to absolutely ruin me. I covered my mouth with both hands, unable to do anything but stare raptly at Toriko. Understanding and glee spread across Toriko's face. She'd figured out my desire.

Until mere moments ago, our nakedness had been no more than that. Just another awkward state of undress, like when we got in the bath. Not anymore. My nudity, and Toriko's, took on entirely new meaning. One little switch inside of me got flipped, and it caused a startlingly dramatic change in my perception. It was mystifying how, as that change occurred, it swallowed up the entire atmosphere of the scene, including Toriko.

Stuff like this can happen... I thought in a daze. The room was dominated by my lust which had suddenly materialized. As it overlapped with Toriko's desire, the atmosphere inside the room became something kind of extraordinary.

"Oh, I get it," Toriko said in a low, husky voice. "That's what you're into, Sorawo?"

"I... I dunno."

"You don't need to lie."

"I dunno. I dunno." I shook my head vigorously.

I don't know what it means. I'm embarrassed. And scared. But I can't take my eyes off Toriko.

Toriko moved slowly. Looking at me with upturned eyes, she sidled up to me on top of the bed, like a carnivore would her prey. I was terrified—not of Toriko, but of this unknown part of myself.

Scared or not, I could no longer run away. I didn't even know if I wanted to.

At last, Toriko was in front of my eyes. As she stared down at me from a kneeling position, I stayed lying there, looking back up at her. She looked unbelievably pretty, and sexy.

"Toriko... What should I do? I can't take my eye off you."

"I'm glad."

"No, that's not what I mean... My *right* eye...!"

I'd always been scared to look at Toriko with it. My right eye drove people crazy. That's why, all this time, whenever I looked at Toriko, I had made an effort not to focus my consciousness on her. I still hadn't been able to resist the urge sometimes, but whenever it happened I hurriedly redirected my attention away from her. Yet now, I stared straight at Toriko, unable to look away.

Toriko held her left hand up in front of me. I saw her smile through her translucent hand.

"It's a bit late to say that, isn't it?"

"But..."

"I was scared to touch you too, Sorawo. Because I don't know what'll happen. Because I might hurt you. But I really did want to touch you. I wanted to feel every part of you. How would you answer me if I said that?"

"I-I don't mind, really."

It had been that way all along. Toriko was hesitant to touch me with her left hand, but I'd never been bothered by it. Toriko nodded, as if she'd known my answer before she asked.

"See? That's why it's okay. You can look. In fact... I *want* you to look at me. Properly."

"I...might make you go crazy."

"That's okay."

Toriko's hand drew closer. It meant something different now than it had before. If Toriko touched me now, I'd be the one to go insane.

She snuggled up to me, so close our noses could touch, and with a voice full of heated passion, she whispered, "Let's go crazy. Together."

There was no way I could form a cogent response to that. The voice that escaped from my throat was like a scream.

And so, we went crazy.

Was it good or bad? We were already beyond assessments like that.

We simply looked and were looked at, touched and were touched—we were groping about blindly, clumsily, violently, and yet without

either of us ever thinking that.

I looked—at Toriko, with my blue right eye.

She was radiant in my vision. I could see the silver phosphorescence of her left hand enter my body, moving up and down inside my pelvis. When that sight overlapped with the regular vision in my left field of view, it was really, really pretty.

It was the first time I'd looked directly at Toriko for so long. I'd used my right eye on Toriko once before, to remove the curses that had gotten inside her when we got wrecked by the Kotoribako, but even then it was incredibly brief. Despite that, Toriko had still started getting weird that time, so there was no way that this longer exposure wasn't going to have an effect.

However, the way that effect manifested was different from any other time before now.

The people I'd driven mad with my right eye before now had mostly exhibited increased aggression. I'd half expected the same from Toriko, but I was fine with that. But instead, she became more and more...unraveled.

Like a tightly woven textile coming apart at the edges, the elements that made up Toriko broke apart and spread out. I'd also seen her in a similar state that time with the Kotoribako, and with the Time-space Man too. My right eye was triggering the same effect now.

The words Tsuji had said crossed my mind. Something about my evil eye feeling like it was specialized towards breaking people because of its effect on the integrity of the mind. True to those words, Toriko gradually disintegrated before my eyes. The elements that constituted the human being called Toriko spread out like the branches of a tree. A multi-dimensional tree diagram expanding explosively. If I focused on any one part of it, Toriko became rude, polite, lewd, or embarrassed. I didn't have the composure to focus or think as I watched, so Toriko changed from one thing to another as my gaze wandered. Laughing, getting angry, crying, fearing, moaning—feeling as if she were flowing from one state to the next, in constant flux, and yet in all of them simultaneously.

Honestly, it wouldn't have been unusual for me to panic at this point. Toriko was going to pieces more thoroughly than I'd ever seen before, and it was happening right before my eyes, after all. But that's not what happened. Toriko looked beautiful, opening before me like a flower in bloom, and I was aware of every minute branch of the tree, down to their very tips. There was another perspective, distinct from the one that was going crazy together with Toriko, that had a total grasp of everything that was going on. I was sure that this me, if I wanted it to, would be able to restore Toriko to her original form, much like winding back the clock.

At the same time, Toriko's hands were also touching me.

My senses had already gone nuts, and I was thrilled to have Toriko touch me absolutely anywhere. I couldn't tell her right hand from her left, or where either was touching.

Toriko's hand was exposing me more and more. I was already naked, so there shouldn't have been any more for me to take off, and yet Toriko's hand tore away the shell that I'd been wearing. All of these thick things I'd had no idea I was wearing were taken off of me one after another. As I was feeling vulnerable, with the things that had protected me taken away, her warm right hand and cool left slid inside me. I had no idea what she was doing to me, and the sensations, unlike any I'd ever tasted before, drove me crazy. Toriko's hand was as maddening as my eye.

Toriko's left hand had done some awful damage to one of the Fourth Kinds that Runa Urumi was keeping as a pet. Knowing that, I'd been bracing myself for something to happen, or there to be some degree of pain when she touched me for real. But it didn't hurt at all. The way her hand moved, tracing the outline of my body—its true outline—was as gentle as could be, sensitive yet bold, overflowing with care, incredibly unreserved, and audacious. It felt like it was packed full of all the experiences of being touched by another person.

In another way, different from mine, Toriko was unraveling the person that I was too. I was being decomposed, broken apart. The things that had been pressed into a human form were decompressed, and expanded outwards without limit.

The whole time, I was mystified. What in the world were my eye and Toriko's hand doing? They perceived beings from the Otherside, reading them like the pages of a book, grasping their depths, and at times harming them. We had walked all this way not knowing what these transformations we'd gained from our contact with the Kunekune really were. Now that we'd turned our powers on one another, I felt like I was coming to a vague understanding of it. The surfaces that had been born in the gap where we made contact with the Otherside—this eye, and this hand—were an interface where human perception, along with the human body, had become unstable.

Even if they were doing things through a different route than the original senses they were based on, they might be doing the same thing. Learning through sight. Learning through touch. I had been afraid to look at Toriko. Toriko had been afraid to touch me. Now, as we were looking at, or touching, our partner directly, tossed about on the waves of madness, we began to gradually find a way to take control of the situation.

There was no helping our own madness. But we could control our partner's. We both understood that. As we each messed around with

the other's very being, using eye and hand, the way that we were being toyed with, unable to do anything about it, was so incredibly...erotic.

The way we shouted and screamed, spasming and flailing around uncontrollably as we spouted nonsense, it would have looked, to any objective observer, like we'd gone insane. I'm not even sure that we'd maintained our human forms. But as it continued, we each gradually found things the other enjoyed. We each took the other to good places, in a tempest of insanity, until, suddenly, there we came to a lull in the storm. There, in the eye of the typhoon, we found our place of greatest calm.

Inside the lull, words had lost all meaning. We weren't even speaking in tongues. The giggles, screams, moans, and sighs went on with no end in sight. We were two beasts intertwined.

Those beasts had many bodies. Many faces and limbs appeared only to disappear, grew only to melt away once more. A beautiful Toriko, ugly Toriko, filthy Toriko, monstrous Toriko. The faceless Toriko and the Toriko with the messed up face that I'd seen before were included in the mix too. Those things that appeared before me as mujina may have been doppelgangers of Toriko in a way. Was it the Otherside that showed them to me? Toriko's unconscious mind? My own fears? Or all of them combined? It didn't matter which it was anymore. Now that I was stripped bare, with my shell torn off, I could accept all of those Torikos as they were.

And by touching me, Toriko seemed to be sensing many different "me"s. The smooth me, the rough me, the bumpy me, the broken me, the extraneous me, the warm me, the cold me... There were all these "me"s I couldn't see, and Toriko's hand was accepting all of them without exception.

These two beasts with all these bodies converged through their desire for one another and were bound together. We were blending together at the interfaces where we connected. The different 'us's melted together, without ever becoming a perfect whole, but without fully separating either. Like a chimera made from two types of living being. Or two galaxies colliding.

The color of the calm world was blue. As we whorled together, intertwining, the ultrablue abyss spread out endlessly beneath us. We didn't fear it. Because this was our place. No one was watching us. No one knew we were here. We were the only ones watching, and the only ones who knew.

So the only things Toriko and I have to fear are each other.

In the midst of the deep, clear blue, we perceived one another. Through sight, touch, and all our sensory organs. On top of a suspension bridge that had completely stopped shaking, we met one

another for the very first time.

Lovely and frightening. Frighteningly lovely. We were supposed to be different people, and yet we were so close that we couldn't part.

Together, we were a single being of the Otherside.

Nice to meet you, Sorawo.

Nice to meet you, Toriko.

Let's go together. As far as we can. Just the two of us.

8

Toriko was on the tablet screen, shooting a gun.

It was a video shot from behind her with a camcorder. Her limbs which were lanky relative to her torso, and her somewhat unbalanced figure were typical of a teen who was still growing. She wore a polo shirt that was a loud, fluorescent color, and her blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail.

When Toriko fired the assault rifle, the small, round target in the distance let out a high-pitched metallic ring. Toriko moved along, hitting one target after another, then threw the rifle into a metal barrel placed along the course and proceeded to pick up a shotgun, which she got into position with.

The way she moved as she pulled the slide on the underside of the barrel to chamber the cartridge, then shot down the target was brilliant. How much had she had to practice for that? I could see signs of the tension that came from this being a real match, but she hardly made any mistakes, and even when the gun jammed she was able to handle it calmly.

Once she was finished with the shotgun, the handgun was up last. She held it in both hands, firing with a stable posture, and kept steadily moving forward. Once the last target was finally cleared, the course was finished.

Scoring was still to come, so she couldn't have known what the result was yet, but she probably had a good feeling about it. When Toriko turned back to glance at the camera, there was a proud smile on her face.

"Wow. You did good."

"I know, right? I think so too. This is the best I ever was at shooting."

"What about now?"

"I'm out of practice. It's not like I can go to a shooting range."

"Why not practice on the Otherside?"

"We're running low on ammo, you know..."

"We'll have to go looking for more."

I abruptly returned to my senses in the middle of that

conversation. I'd been moving and talking automatically up until that point when, suddenly, my consciousness popped into being. We stopped talking and looked at one another.

"Huh..."

"Oh?"

We were leaning back against the headboard of the bed with pillows in place of cushions. We were sitting close together, still naked, with a blanket thrown over us because it was cold. Toriko looked down at the tablet, then at her own hand with confusion.

"What happened to us?"

"We were having a normal conversation just now...unconsciously."

It was like we'd been rebooted. The movements and the dialog loaded in first, and then our consciousness started up after...

It's not quite accurate to say it was robotic. The conversation had been totally normal, and the content of it hadn't broken down at any point. We just weren't conscious until partway through.

Sensing someone looking at me, I looked to the side, and Toriko was staring at my chest.

"What...?"

"They're so cute, Sorawo."

"Now listen, you."

"Ahaha." Toriko's joyful laughter was contagious, and I burst out laughing too.

Ahhh. Now we've gone and done it. We went and explored another of life's unknown regions.

We leaned on one another, our shoulders touching, unable to tell which of us had moved first. The warm sensation of skin on skin was comforting.

"That was kinda...amazing. You remember it, Sorawo?"

"Honestly, not that well. My head was all kinds of messed up."

"Same here..."

In the total calm above that blue abyss, we'd had a terrifyingly dense and extraordinary experience. But we couldn't remember most of it. Even as we tried to recall it, the memories slipped off our consciousness. Maybe it couldn't be perceived in our current mental state. Like being unable to remember a dream while in a waking state.

"We went to the Otherside, right?" Toriko asked.

"We did," I agreed. "I feel like, by the time we noticed, we were in pretty deep."

"Was it just me who wasn't that scared?"

"Nah, it was the same for me. Everything around us was blue, but it wasn't scary."

"I wonder why?"

"I dunno. Maybe because we were on the side that scares people?"

Toriko got a mystified look on her face when I said that.

"The side that scares people? You mean the Otherside's side?"

"We weren't human anymore, were we, Toriko? When we were there."

"...Yeah."

Toriko suddenly moved closer to me and chomped down on my ear.

"Owww!"

"Heheh!" Toriko giggled, then, in a conspiratorial tone, she said, "We went at it like animals. Wrapped around one another, like we were melting together..."

"You're not still aroused, are you...?"

"Aren't you, Sorawo?"

I wasn't *not*, to be honest. But if I told her that, I had a feeling we'd start going at it again. That's why I leaned back against the pillows, without answering, and stared up at the ceiling.

"I'm exhausted. My throat is all parched, and I'm hungry too."

Toriko smiled, gently patting my head. Allowing her to continue, I asked, "Was that good for you, Toriko?"

"Huh?"

"You wanted to do that kind of stuff with me, right...?"

Though I'm sure she didn't expect it to get that bizarre.

"Yeah," Toriko said, hugging my head tight as she nodded repeatedly. "Yeah. It made me so...so happy."

"Uh-huh."

For Toriko, having sex was probably proof of something between us. I wasn't that particular about it myself, but I was glad she seemed happy.

"Do you still want to call us lovers?" I asked.

"I wonder," Toriko replied. "I like the idea of being lovers, but...how about you, Sorawo? Do you still prefer we call ourselves accomplices?"

"I feel like...we kinda just blew away any kind of relationship that word could represent, you know?"

"Me too. I don't remember it properly, but after what we just experienced, I don't even know what you could call the two of us now."

"I know, right?"

We were silent for a time, and I thought idly about it. Eventually, Toriko let out a sudden laugh.

"Nothing's coming to mind. 'Sorawo and Toriko' is about the only thing you could call us, don't you think?"

"Hmm, you may be right."

“That’s too long, so how about shortening it to Soratori?”

I burst out laughing as I remembered the time she’d tried to use the name Soratori Road for what we now called Route 1 in the other world.

“That’s like one of those ship names,” I told her.

“What’re those?”

“You’re a mangaka’s daughter and you don’t know that?!”

“Nope, not a clue. Is it something dirty?”

“Well, maybe?”

“Hmm.”

As we were talking, a thought occurred to me.

“Do you know what the ‘nue’ is?”

“It’s a Japanese monster, right? Made up of a bunch of different animals mixed together.”

“Yeah, that’s the one. As an extension of that, the word can also refer to something that doesn’t have a discernible form.”

“Mm-hm.”

“The kanji for ‘nue’ is usually written with the ‘night’ radical on the left side, with the ‘bird’ radical on the right. But there’s another kanji which uses ‘sky’ on the left instead that can also be read as ‘nue.’”

“Huh? Oh, yeah?” Toriko’s eyes widened. I went on.

“While we were there, the two of us got all mixed up together, right? Intertwined, melting into one, like animals... Depending on how you look at it, you might say we were like a nue.”

“So, basically, if you wanted a word to represent our relationship, we wouldn’t be ‘lovers,’ or ‘accomplices’...but a ‘nue’?”

“I was thinking that’d be one way to—”

“I like it!”

“Huh? You do?”

“It has no clear form, and it takes one kanji from each of our names... Isn’t it just perfect?!”

I’d just come up with the idea on the spur of the moment, but it looked like it was a much bigger hit with Toriko than I’d expected.

“It’s cute. Nue. I like the sound of it. Maybe I’ll get a tattoo of the kanji.”

“You’d take it that far?”

“You’re not gonna get a matching one?”

“They might not let us in the hot springs in Japan anymore. You sure?”

“Huh?! I wouldn’t like that... You think it’d be okay if we put them somewhere no one will see?”

“Where would no one see? This is sounding painful, and I’m not really on board with it.”

“Wha?”

Was this what they called pillow talk? As we spoke, the sense of ordinary daily life gradually came back. When I moved, my stomach grumbled.

“Hey, technically, we just came back from the Otherside.”

“Yeah?”

“So, are we having an after-party?”

Toriko exploded with laughter when I asked that. I looked down at Toriko in astonishment as she doubled over, wheezing.

“An after-party for...s-sex? I’ve never heard that one before!”

“I told you, I’m hungry.”

“Stop iiit. Don’t say anymore...!”

“Is it that funny? I’ve heard American adult videos end with them all having a barbecue party together.”

“What the heck? I’ve never heard of that...!”

“Whatever! My stomach’s empty here! Besides, what time is it?”

When her laugh attack subsided, Toriko wiped the tears from her eyes and said, “It’s 2:00 already.”

“Huh? In the morning? You’re kidding me?”

I’d been thinking it was kinda dark outside the window. Even though it was afternoon when I entered her place. It was a common pattern for time to jump forward after encountering a mujina, but what about this?

“Nowhere’s gonna be open at this hour.”

“Uber’s going to be pretty much a lost cause too.”

“That doesn’t really leave us any options but the convenience store, but...you wanna go? To the convenience store?”

“The rain...does seem to have let up, yeah. Let’s go.”

“Sure!”

We got out of bed and got ready to head out. We rounded up the indoor clothes that were scattered across the floor. My own clothes were in the dryer, completely dry.

Even if we were heading out in plain clothes, we still wore proper shoes. The bag with my Makarov and exploration goods was crucial for even a little trip out into the neighborhood. Once we were ready, I put my shoes on in the entrance hall. Before opening the door, I turned back to face Toriko, then stretched upward to give her a kiss.

It was the first time I initiated, but I was satisfied with the surprised and bashful look it got out of Toriko.

We set out into the middle of the night, with the rain having just let up. For a few minutes’ walk to the convenience store to buy booze and food. That was all it was, but I was overjoyed to be able to do it with Toriko.

After heading back to Toriko's place to eat and drink, we crawled into bed again sometime close to dawn. Toriko seemed to want to mess around with me a little bit more, but our exhaustion and inebriation soon saw us both nodding off.

Somewhere in my deep sleep, I had a dream. Toriko and I were cautiously crossing a suspension bridge. Up ahead, the bridge melted into the fog, disappearing out of sight. We didn't know how far it went, or even that there was any end to it. The next step might send us plunging us into the abyss, and there was no telling when the bridge itself might fall. Terrifying monsters might emerge from the fog too.

Despite all of that, we were excited. We went hand-in-hand, across the unsteady footing, excited to keep on moving forward.

We didn't know what might happen. We had no clue where this was leading. But that was true of ourselves too.

Unidentified and indistinct. We were two who were one. We were the nue.

We raced through the fog together, unbeknownst to anyone, laughing boisterously all the while.

Works Referenced

This work uses many preexisting true ghost stories and pieces of net lore as its motif. In particular, this section will note those which have been used directly. It will touch on the content of the main book, so if you are concerned about spoilers, please tread carefully.

■File 24: Mujina Attacks

The portrayals of the mujina that appear in this chapter are modeled on Gendai Hyaku Monogatari Shinmimibukuro Daiichiya [Modern-day 100 Stories, Shinmimibukuro, The First Night] (Hirokatsu Kihara/Ichirou Nakayama, Media Factory, 1998) Chapter 63 “Mujina wo Mita Hito Sono Ichi” [The Person Who Saw a Mujina 1] and Chapter 64 “Mujina wo Mita Hito Sono Ni” [The Person Who Saw a Mujina 2].

Both stories are experiential reports of people who called out to a woman who was squatting beneath a telephone pole only to discover she was a strange creature with no face. These powerful reports are colored by unique details such as “She had a face like a nopperabou, but with pores,” and, “Her face was complicated in a way I struggle to describe,” which lend them a sense of realism.

For further accounts of encountering mujina in the modern era, Ichirou Nakamura dedicates Chapter 1 “Mujina no Koto” [The Mujina] of Youkai Arawaru Gendai Youkai Dangi [Youkai Appear, A Discussion of Modern Youkai] (U-Time Publishing, 1994) to the topic.

It’s fascinating that, in addition to the common point of women in kimono who are squatting, the encounterer is also said to experience a sense of déjà vu after encountering them.

In the 2channel message board’s Married Women Board “Chottoshita Fushigi na Hanashi ya Reikan no Hanashi Sono 96” [Slightly Mysterious Stories and Stories About Sensing Spirits 96] thread, post 287~ (29/6/2016), there is a story from a fishing village in the countryside of Wakayama prefecture that took place before the war and involves a mujina that appeared day and night at the entrance to the village.

This story, titled “Bakasareta” [Tricked] on compilation sites, also describes the texture of a “face with no eyes or nose, just bumpy skin” that had “no luster, like poorly made straw paper.”

There is a slightly unusual nopperabou experiential report in the 2channel message board's Occult/Paranormal Phenomena Board “Yama ni Matsuwaru Kowai Hanashi Part 4” [“Scary Stories Involving the Mountains Part 4”] thread, post 842 (13/12/2003) which was discussed by Raimei Ichigou.

The nopperabou woman who appears in this story pokes a finger into her own face, creating large holes that serve as eyes and a mouth.

■File 25: Learn Your Lesson

The scene of being unjustifiably hit with a heated frying pan was based on an experiential report posted to the 2channel message board's Occult/Paranormal Phenomena Board “Fukakai na Taiken, Nazo no Hanashi ~enigma~ Part 61” [Incomprehensible Experiences, Mysterious Stories ~enigma~ Part 61], post 170~ (18/5/2010).

This story, known under the title “Mixi de Deatta Kanojo” [The Girlfriend I Met on Mixi], doesn't have a single paranormal element, yet is still incredibly perplexing. It is a masterpiece of the “high strangeness” variety of ghost story.

■File 26: Accomplices No More

This chapter takes no particular ghost story as its motif.

The book which appears in the text *Seiteki Gyakutai wo Uketa Hito no Pojitibu Sekkusu Gaido* [The Positive Sex Guide For People Who Have Experienced Sexual Abuse] (Staci Haines, Translated by Tomori Itou, Akashi Shoten, 2001) actually exists.

I considered whether it was acceptable to use this book, which was written in order to help real-life victims, as a prop in a fictional story. It was inevitable that the possibility that there had been sexual abuse would occur to Toriko when she tried to think seriously about how to face Sorawo, and it was only natural that, acting on that premise, she would then make an attempt to learn about it.

I felt that avoiding mentioning the title of the work, or switching it for a fictional one would be much worse, and therefore had it appear under its actual title. (In writing this series, I have decided that things that actually exist should be referred to by their proper names when possible.)

Because Sorawo, our viewpoint character, is cynical and detached, even when it comes to herself, there are times when I am forced to write about serious issues as if they're “someone else's problem.” However, that is not my own intention as an author, and I do try to avoid the portrayal of them in my work from coming off that way.

I know I always say this, but I would like to give my thanks to the people who reported the many other true ghost stories and net lore from which I have taken direct or indirect influence.

Thank you for your continued enjoyment and for being frightened.
I hope this book can repay my gratitude in some small way.



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